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RIKU MISORA
Illust をん
落第騎士の
英雄譚
キャバルリィ
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Prologue: Festival Music

The creation of a national Akatsuki Academy, the card that Prime Minister Tsukikage unveiled just before the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, sent a shock-wave through society.

Of course it would. For member states of the League of Mage-Knight Nations, the League's headquarters would as a rule be responsible for the training of the nation's military force, the Blazers. With the word 'national'—that was to say, within Japan's sovereign control—Tsukikage meant to annul this agreement by declaring the creation of a training institution for Blazers publicly. This could be nothing but a declaration of war against the League.

His actions split public opinion in two.

The naysayers were on one side. Earnest opinions that Japan had enjoyed half a century of peace within the Federation, making changes to this system is unnecessary and not to be done lightly, revulsion that Tsukikage played a student event like the Seven Stars Sword Festival for politics and that he had resorted to harsh methods like the partial destruction of Hagun Academy—these and others fell under this classification.

Then there were the supporters. Those who believed that the training of a nation's defenders, the Blazers, by an external organization was in itself strange, or that Japan should have control over this process, and that Tsukikage was merely correcting a mistake that had persisted for the past 50 years. More extreme views asserted that Japan was capable of existing as an independent power, equal to the likes of Russia and America, and that participating in a collective of the weak like the League was unnecessary.

Even those who were normally uninterested in politics expressed their respective stances.

「Tsukikage's methods are too forceful. I feel repulsed.」

「The assault on Hagun Academy is a rumor created by the naysayers. Akatsuki Academy only used illusionary form. There were no casualties.」

「I don't want to send our children out to fight the wars of other nations. Becoming independent from the League is a must.」

「This nation does not even possess the military capability to maintain its independence and sovereignty. We must remain within the League.」

「Tsukikage is colluding with Rebellion. That man cannot be trusted.」

「To begin with, the act of joining the League fifty years ago was a mistake.」

Such things were discussed by friends and peers at drinking parties, in housewives' gossip, with the more proactive taking to civil movement and airing their views in the streets. Most likely, everyone could feel it. That at this instant, the huge swell of an era was threatening to surge forth. Would the country known as Japan continue onward within the League of Mage-Knight Nations? Or would it ultimately rise up as a fully independent nation? All this would be decided at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, which even at this moment was starting.

If Akatsuki, led by Tsukikage, were to display strength befitting his boasts, popular opinion would all at once swing in favor of "leaving the Federation". Conversely, if Akatsuki were to be defeated by the existing seven schools, then Tsukikage would lose the ear of the public. This was an anomalous Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, one that could decide even the course of a nation.

This student's event in which heretofore unsurpassed excitement and interest were invested—was drawing close at hand.

Chapter 1: The National Powerhouses

Part 1

On a piece of reclaimed coastal land far from the center of Osaka stood a collection of unpopulated buildings. During a period of urban development some decades ago, this area was heavily built up, but the essential attraction of enterprises was unsuccessful and tenants did not move in. As a result, any new development was abandoned, with those that had been built left as relics of the failure.

Yet, that 'ghost town' where not a soul would dwell normally was brimming with life, filled with rows of stalls and the heavenward-reaching clamor of people gathered from all over the Japanese Isles.

Why were these people gathered there? There was only one reason. Two days from now—the annual student knight event, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, would be held in this ghost town's Bay Dome.

In previous years, the Festival always garnered more of the public eye than the professional mage-knight combat league, the King of Knights. Of course, this meant that in those years the degree of competition for tickets and nearby accommodation was extremely high. But with the uproar surrounding Akatsuki Academy that had arisen from its attack on Hagun Academy, that level of scrutiny only increased this year. As a result, the aforementioned competition increased manifold. People from inside and outside the country of all walks of life scrambled to reach the site, surrounding it with an anomalously feverish atmosphere two days before the event even began. Those who arrived at the location early were not limited to

audience members. Many of those participating in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival had also gathered on-site well before the opening ceremony, and were resting at the competitors' provided living quarters.

The one carrying the flag of Hagun Academy as the captain of its representatives, the "Worst One" Kurogane Ikki, was one of them.

"Hmm… somehow this feels really weird."

In an chic and elegantly furnished room of a fine hotel, Ikki Kurogane stood in deep thought before an antique-style full-length mirror. His attire was not his usual uniform; instead, he was dressed up stylishly from top to toe in a navy blue tuxedo and a bow tie of the same color, and with a lustrous sheen on his leather shoes.

Of course, dressing up was not one of Ikki's interests. He was wearing attire like this for a reason. The League's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival steering committee had arranged for a buffet-style party to be held today, two days before the opening ceremony, for those participants who had arrived early. It was for his attendance at this function that he was presently selecting a set of formal-wear. However, he was having a rough time.

I can't wear my normal clothes at an occasion like this, but….

Being in no way used to formal dress, he could not find one that suited him among the suits loaned to him by the management. In fact, Ikki thought, they were so ill-suited to him that it was laughable.

I wonder if the problem is my spiky hair.

Thinking thus, he grabbed a comb and parted his usually hairstyle to one side, then examined the changes in the mirror.

"Ah, that looks more fitting than before—"

But this would only last an instant. The hair he had just combed

down sprang back into their original place with a **bing!**, as if yelling "Who would listen to what you have to say? I'll do what I like!"

"These stubborn things."

Didn't they resemble a certain someone, he wondered? While mumbling harshly, Ikki took off the tuxedo.

For now, we should consider this one unsatisfactory.

At first, he had thought that little could go wrong in choosing the most high-class suit, but the fit turned out to be so bad that even though wearing it would not embarrass him as far as etiquette was concerned, he could not accept it personally. So after some fretting—

"After all, I guess this one is the best…."

Ikki took up a light grey three-piece suit from among the sets he had borrowed. It was a safe choice, but that couldn't be helped—after all, he possessed neither the sense nor the ability to flaunt his character through fashion. And in any case, there was only a little time left before the party would start.

Thus, Ikki quickly put on the three-piece. Just at that moment—

"Onii-sama. Is it alright to come in?"

—there came a knock on his door, and with it the voice of his sister and fellow Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative, Shizuku Kurogane. He must have taken too long to dress, for her to have gotten worried and come over to see him.

Thinking this, and feeling ashamed at having taken longer to prepare than a girl like Shizuku, Ikki examined himself in the mirror again in response to her request. His white shirt was not completely buttoned up, exposing his chest and abdomen, though his trousers were at least on properly. If the other party was female, this would usually be a sight he was hesitant to show, but since it was his blood-related younger sister Shizuku, it should be fine. Having judged so—

"Ah, sorry. I'll be ready soon, so it's okay to come in."

"Excuse me."

The door opened even as the words were spoken, and the silver-haired girl, Shizuku, stepped inside the room—

"Onii-sama, I'm read…y—"

—and stopped dead mid-sentence, as well as in her tracks at the entrance to the room. Upon seeing Ikki's state of dress, her green eyes widened with shock. Wondering what might have surprised her so for a moment, Ikki's attention was quickly turned elsewhere—namely, to Shizuku's attire.

Wow, that's amazing.

Shizuku was wearing a dress she too had been loaned to attend the party as a representative, a classy black bustier adorned with intricate flower-petal frills that seemed to absorb the light. Her neckline and shoulders were highly exposed, creating a stark contrast between the dark dress and her snow-white skin. Such attire would normally be too adult for Shizuku's young looks, but a tasteful application of makeup, likely masterminded by none other than her friend and roommate Nagi Arisuin, had caused her to seem several times more mature than usual, thus eliminating any sense of incongruity. It was a beautiful visage that his sister donned at this moment, one befitting of a lady, and Ikki praised it straightforwardly.

"This might be trite… but you look really beautiful, Shizuku."

"…Hau."

At that instant, Shizuku turned a deep crimson and fell backwards, a spray of blood spurting forth from her nose.

"Shi-Shizuku!?"

"Eek! Oh dear!"

Rushing in from where he had probably been waiting outside, Arisuin supported the falling Shizuku with his right hand, while in his left he held a handkerchief to her nose to prevent the blood from dripping onto her dress.

"Wh-What happened, Shizuku? Are you alright?"

Shocked by his sister's odd state, Ikki tried to get closer, but—

"Ah, aa, ah—"

—even as he did so, Shizuku quivered, her face and the handkerchief pressing on nose becoming all the redder.

It could not be helped. Shizuku Kurogane loved her brother Ikki as a woman would. To see the man she could not help but love deeply tell her "you're beautiful" with his chest exposed in a disheveled manner was honestly too much for her. Erotic dress did not differentiate between genders. Ikki, not realizing any of this himself, drew even closer—

"Hey Ikki, please don't get any closer! Button up your shirt first!"

—only to be stopped by Arisuin, who unlike him had immediately understood Shizuku's feelings.

"Eh, eh!?"

"Hurry! Her dress is about to get bloodied!"

"Ah, um—okay, I got it!"

Ikki failed to understand what he might have done wrong, but quickly got dressed in response to Arisuin's fierce scolding. Thanks to that, Shizuku was able to calm down somehow.

"Haa… haa… I am truly sorry for letting you see something unsightly. But Onii-sama… you were a bit too sexy just now."

"Uh, I don't really understand, but sorry. I still haven't decided what I should wear…."

"I think you look great in this suit. Is it unsatisfactory?"

"O-Oh, really? I was worried that I look like a child masquerading as an adult, though."

"It's not like that at all. Ikki's shoulders are well-formed from training, so this suit fits you fine."

Arisuin also piped up in praise from behind Shizuku. With his excellent height and figure, Arisuin looked perfect in a suit, just like a cabaret host. Even though Ikki had never met a host, Arisuin seemed the very image of one, so Ikki could not truly be pleased even when receiving such praise from him. More precisely, could this friend who was much taller really be one year Ikki's junior? Considering that his background was fabricated, Arisuin might even be older. Pondering such things in his heart, Ikki pointed at Arisuin's attire and inquired—

"Are you attending the party too?"

"How could that be?"

Arisuin shook his head while answering in the negative.

"I'm no longer a representative. But I'm going with Kagamin to the journalists' party after this."

"You've totally become Kusakabe-san's errand boy, huh?"

"It can't be helped, since I owe her a favor."

Arisuin shrugged at Shizuku's words. The "favor" he mentioned

referred to the matter of Akatsuki Academy's attack on Hagun Academy only shortly before. Arisuin had originally been one of the enemies, a spy for Akatsuki, especially with regards to Kagami who had previously received an illusionary form strike directly from him. As atonement, he was now being put to hard labor at her right hand as part of the Hagun Academy newspaper club.

All the same, Ikki believed that this was nice of Kagami. Akatsuki had only utilized illusionary form during their attack on Hagun Academy, although this was because their sponsor and man behind the scene, Prime Minister Tsukikage, did not wish to harm his own citizens. But though the body was unharmed, the wound of the heart known as fear would not be easily healed. Currently, the Hagure sisters had lost the will to fight and had thus relinquished their positions as representatives, while Touka Toudou and Utakata Misogi had yet to awaken from the coma-like state they entered after having been struck by a single blow from the Sword Emperor of Wind. Arisuin understood that this unconsciousness had been brought about by extreme exhaustion, and was not life-threatening, but due to his involvement and his upbringing that had led him to have an overly low self-concept, he nonetheless held himself responsible.

It was for the sake of preventing him from wallowing in such thoughts that Kagami used the pretext of repayment to order him around. Moreover, Arisuin had a keen eye for the subtleties of the heart. He had probably noticed and understood Kagami's intentions. Despite that, he continued to 'repay' her while pretending not to know.

I guess Alice honestly wants Kagami-san to depend on him.

So Ikki thought. If they could little by little regain the relationship they had before, that would be great. At that moment, the room's wall-clock began to resound with a sonorous **dong*, *dong**, announcing the arrival of six o'clock in the evening—and thus the time of the party.

"Aah, so it's already this late? Let's go then, Shizuku."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

"Ah. Wait a moment, you two."

Ikki, having already lined up with Shizuku and gotten ready to leave for the party, was stopped by Arisuin. Even as he wondered what was going on, Arisuin snapped a shot of the two of them with the camera on his student datapad.

"A memento for this special occasion where both of you are so well-dressed."

As he said this, Arisuin quickly worked at his datapad, sending the photo to both of them. Shizuku's cheeks colored red with joy upon seeing the photo.

"Waa… thank you, Alice. I will treasure this all my life!"

…All her life, huh…?

Ikki on the other hand felt dispirited. In the end, he still looked out of place in such formal wear, and standing next to Shizuku who wore that look so well he appeared more ludicrous still. It might become a nice memento once he became an adult, though. While he was dwelling on such complicated feelings, however—

I don't think Akatsuki will attend the party, but be careful for the time being.

"Thanks. I'll take this."

Expressing his thanks for the photo as well as the message that had come with it, Ikki headed out to the party.

Part 2

The party was to be held in a reception room on the highest floor of the hotel that housed the representatives. It was not a distance for which one would take the stairs, so Ikki and Shizuku took the elevator to get there. All the way, Shizuku seemed to be in a good mood as she stared at the picture from before.

"Hehe."

"Do you like it that much?"

"Yes. I've already set it as my screensaver."

"Already…."

While smiling wryly, Ikki vowed to himself. The next time he had a chance to be invited to this sort of party, he would attend in his uniform. He would not force himself into wearing this sort of attire a second time.

"When I think about bragging about this to Stella-san, I can't stop smiling."

And just as he had made his vow, he could see another future coming, one in which he would be made to dress up just like this.

"Please don't provoke Stella."

"I can't promise that. In the first place, it's that person's fault for. Not. Being. Here."

She was not present. Indeed, Stella had yet to reach Osaka, just as Shizuku had said. Originally, the Hagun Academy representatives had been scheduled to arrive today, but Stella had apparently contacted Board Chairman Kurono expressing her desire to continue her training with the Yaksha Princess, Nene Saikyou, for as long as possible. During the attack on Hagun Academy by Akatsuki Academy, Stella had been defeated by the Sword Emperor of Wind, Ouma Kurogane. Moreover, she had lost in power, something in which she had boasted absolute confidence. This fact had hurt that confidence

badly. Right now, she was engaged in a desperate struggle to regain it. Perhaps she could grasp something through her training with the strongest person in Hagun Academy, the Yaksha Princess. Nonetheless—

"Onii-sama, do you think Stella-san will get stronger from this training?"

Shizuku suddenly asked. Her tone seemed laced with concern.

"The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is only two days from now. This should be a time for rest. Though I can understand her feelings, I cannot think that this sort of hasty preparation will have any meaning. Isn't she making this decision too lightly?"

Forget "seemed". Shizuku was genuinely anxious about Stella, about whether she might ruin her health due to the overly strenuous training, and thus not be able to enter this crucial event in her most optimal condition.

"That's kind of you, Shizuku."

"Wha—!"

At this, Shizuku whirled around, her face reddening as if aflame.

"I-It's not like I'm worried about that person or anything! I'm only worried because you're looking forward to fighting her, that's all!"

So Shizuku protested in annoyance, but her bluff was plain to see. Even though they were normally butting heads, Ikki knew that there was friendship between them, though Shizuku did not wish for that point to be mentioned. As such—

"So you're asking if she can get stronger with such last-minute training, huh?"

Ikki responded to her question directly.

"Yes. I think it's a stretch. There is too little time to do anything, and that buildup of undue stress will only worsen her condition during such a crucial event as the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

Indeed, Ikki had the same fears about Stella's judgement as Shizuku did. Of course, it was possible to grow stronger within a short period of time through intensive training, but—this, in his view, only worked when one's skill was still raw. He likened honing oneself in anything to climbing a mountain. The path from the foot to the first checkpoint would be gentle enough for one to run up. In the same way, an inexperienced person could make great strides in strength within a short time. But a seventh checkpoint, or an eighth checkpoint, that was different. Just as a mountain path got steeper and harsher as one approached the summit, so too did the path to the zenith of strength get steeper as one climbed towards it. The same step. The same one meter. Yet the effort required to advance would be higher. Such was the case when honing oneself, regardless of the subject.

"And Stella is far from inexperienced."

Thus, to be become stronger than she was at present, she would need to expend the appropriate amount of time and effort. That was Ikki's thought. Taking into account Stella's strength, about one week's worth of intensive training… was a little too short.

"That's true…."

Having heard Ikki's opinion, Shizuku's face fell a little. She herself felt that it was reckless, and to hear her brother whom she trusted back up her view only confirmed it.

"Really, what is that person doing…?"

Shizuku muttered, seeming at once sad and shocked.

"However, that is what I would say if it was a normal person."

"Eh!?"

Ikki's analysis continued. Stella was certainly reckless. If it was them, they wouldn't do it. Couldn't do it. Up to this point, he and Shizuku were in agreement.

"Given the potential of the Crimson Princess… Stella Vermillion's present strength has yet to even reach the base of that mountain."

Ikki knew better than anyone the unfairness of talent. There was a huge variance in terms of the potential each individual person possessed, and among these, Stella's was first-class. The size and grandeur of the mountain she could climb was not comparable with those he and others could. Its cloud-piercing height and steepness not something he could measure.

"Therefore, I believe it is possible for her to make an explosive leap in strength."

As the one who was closest to her and loved her above all others, Ikki believed that she would return, having gained strength incomparable to before.

"I believe that in two days, she will surely show it to us in person."

"I hope so, then. I too… want to try fighting that person once. It would be disappointing if she were to just collapse and get eliminated."

As Shizuku replied thus in a brighter voice, the elevator reached the highest floor.

Part 3

The metal doors opened to the pleasant smiles of two waiters as they greeted Ikki and Shizuku.

"Ikki Kurogane-sama and Shizuku Kurogane-sama from Hagun

Academy? Please proceed inside. The party is just up ahead."

"Thank you very much."

With the exchange of formalities completed, Ikki and Shizuku trod the red-carpeted way towards another door in front, where from within the intermingled sounds of a great many people conversing could be heard. Clearly, the party had already begun.

The representatives of the various schools… are beyond this door.

Ikki swallowed, his heart pounding.

"You look happy, Onii-sama."

"This is the stage I could only yearn for last year after all…."

Indeed, as they had spoken of earlier, Ikki looked forward to his battle with Stella. But that was not all. The people beyond that door—the elite who had been chosen from throughout the nation, they were all above an F-Rank like Ikki. People he could test his abilities against without reserve. He could not help but get his blood up at this. Just thinking about being pitted against such people made him champ at the bit impatiently. Attendance at this party had been voluntary. He had gone through all that trouble to wear that suit here, just so he could see with his own eyes those he would be fighting a little sooner.

"Well, even though they probably wouldn't consider an F-Rank like me a threat, eh?"

It couldn't be helped—this was a Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival in which Stella and Ouma, A-Ranks, were participating after all. On the contrary, this was definitely a good opportunity. His opponents were the best of the best; there was a basic difference in strength between them and himself. As the Worst One, his fighting style revolved around manipulating that limited talent to its fullest extent in order to defeat a stronger foe. If he were to be underestimated by an opponent, that would only shorten the distance between them—a

good thing. Considering this, Ikki gave a pleased chuckle as he pushed the door open—

—and found that he had been mistaken. All commotion ceased the moment he showed himself, with uncountable glances piercing his body. It was like receiving a heavy blow. The gazes and the ensuing silence lasted merely a moment, and then the noise re-asserted itself, but—

「That's the guy who defeated Raikiri, Hagun's Worst One?」

「That's some aura he has around him. Bright as a honed blade… so awesome!」

「He's definitely national-level, maybe even one of the better ones.」

「You can tell at first glance from that aura that he's strong. To have made this kind of knight repeat a year, what the hell was the chairman of Hagun Academy thinking, really?」

One could overhear in the conversations proof that the attention focused on Ikki previously had not been a coincidence.

"Heh. As expected of those who are also at the national level. They could recognize Onii-sama's strength immediately."

Shizuku broke into a pleased expression as she examined the room's atmosphere from beside her brother, who for his part—

It seems I was the one who underestimated them.

—smiled wryly, unbeknownst to her.

How naive he had been, to think that they would be careless around him. The ones present were not only those who had been chosen from all over the country, but also those who had persisted in competing, stalwart and unafraid despite the entry of a powerful force like Akatsuki Academy. There were none among them who

would be fool enough to get careless because of something like rank. That they would be able to recognize another's ability at a glance here should have been taken for granted.

As he soaked in this atmosphere, so apparently different from the battles back in school, it gradually came to Ikki.

I've come here.

To the place where the student knights of Japan would compete to take the summit. This was surely a place where he could push the limits of what was possible for himself. But even as he trembled with excitement at that realization—

"Ah—! O-Onii-sama!"

—suddenly sounding flustered, Shizuku tugged at the hem of his pants.

"What happened?"

"Over there—!"

In the direction that Shizuku had pointed, standing in front of a table on which the party dishes had been arranged, was a young lady who seemed to be looking for someone.

That's—!

Ikki quickly realized the reason for Shizuku's surprise. The lady in question was blonde and unusually dressed. Various colored paints streaked her hair, and an apron served as the sole barrier between her and voluminous toplessness. There was no way he could forget her, one of the people who had attacked his school.

"Akatsuki Academy's 'Bloody Da Vinci', Sara Bloodlily-san…!"

"I didn't think that she would come to this party after doing such a

thing."

It was as Shizuku said. The students of Akatsuki Academy were all elites of the underworld sent by the terrorist organization Rebellion, though only a minority knew of this due to information manipulation by Prime Minister Tsukikage and the Japanese government. Nonetheless, to come to the party after having violently attacked and half-destroyed Hagun Academy was something that the word "brave" did not adequately describe. This act had sent shock waves not just through Hagun but all the seven schools, leading many to forfeit, and as such there was significant hatred toward Akatsuki even by schools besides Hagun. And as though to prove that point, none of the participants seemed intent on approaching Sara. It was due to this that Ikki had not considered that they might make an appearance at this event.

Should we call them defiant, or just bold?

At that moment, Sara's hitherto meandering gaze locked onto Ikki's position, and in the next—

"Eh—"

—of all things, she began making a quick beeline for him, as if to say 'I've finally found you', stopping only when they were nose-to-nose.

Then she began to scrutinize him.

Wh-Wh-What!?

"Umm, what do you want with me?"

Her sudden approach confused him. Undoubtedly, she had looked solely at him and thus clearly had business with him. But having had no interaction with her, he could not imagine what that business was. On the other hand, Sara, who was staring at Ikki's face as he wavered—

"…Very good."

—muttered in a detached manner, while proceeding to run her hands over Ikki's shoulders and chest as though conducting a body-search.

"Uwa, B-Bloodlily-san!?"

"Hey, you! What are you trying to do!?"

"Be quiet. I'm concentrating right now."

Ignoring Ikki and Shizuku's panicked voices, Sara continued to trace the contours of Ikki's body through his clothes. She was a terrorist, and a foe whom they had clashed with once before. Defenselessly allowing her to touch his body should be dangerous. Ikki understood this, and yet—

I can feel that she is really focused….

Despite his attempts, he could not feel any negative emotions from her, whether it be enmity or the intent to harm. Rather, she exuded an seriousness that made him hesitate to stop her. Hence, he did not forcefully push her off of him, but was attempting to ask her the purpose for which she had been so intently inspecting him when—she forcefully ripped through his suit and the shirt he was wearing under it.

"Eeeeehhhh!?"

"O-Onii-samaaa!?"

At this, Ikki put some distance between them, shouting while shielding his exposed chest.

"What are you doing so suddenly—!?"

In response, Sara replied—

"...Okay, you pass."

Her cheeks heated up mildly as she spoke these incomprehensible words.

"Wh-What do you mean by pass!? I can't make heads or tails out of what you said!"

"On that day when we first met, I fell for you. There was beauty and kindness in your face, yet one could also clearly see strength within that straight-backed, clean-cut figure… and to add on to that, a robust musculature, honed and trained to unblemished perfection, it's just wonderful. You are, without a doubt, my ideal man."

"E-Eeeeehhh!?"

Her sudden outpouring of praise only confused Ikki more. What sort of situation was this? Did he really just receive a love confession?

This—what should I do!?

He wavered all the more under her heated gaze. It was too sudden; he didn't know how to reply.

No, he did know. He should answer with "I already have Stella". But though he had decided so, her face was almost terrifyingly serious. Even though she was a terrorist, a person of Ikki's character would hesitate to express his confusion in a straightforward manner.

"That's why, you pass. You are the only man fit to be my nude model. So with that understanding, I'd like you to come over to my room and undress."

"What 'understanding'!? No! I refuse! I don't remember auditioning for this!"

"No. I refuse your refusal."

"Now you're just trying to get your way!"

"Well, if you don't want to disrobe no matter what, I'll have to strip you."

With those words, magic power surged all about her as she materialized her twin Devices—a palette and a brush—into her hands.

This person… is serious.

Serious to the point where she was willing to use her Device in order to strip him down. Yet, they were at a party. They could not start a fight here, and so Ikki was dismayed and at a loss as to what to do when—

"Get away from Onii-sama, you pervert!!"

"Buh—!"

—Shizuku sent Sara flying with a drop kick.

"Onii-sama, are you alright?"

Having kicked the deviant who seemed about to attack her brother, she now moved to defend him. Amazingly, she hadn't just lashed out with her leg, but rather a full-bodied flying drop kick. What a reliable ally, Ikki thought as he replied to her worried query with a nod.

"Yes, I'm fine. She only broke the buttons on my shirt…?"

"…Tch!"

At his reply, all of Shizuku's hairs seemed to stand on end.

"…Unforgivable."

"Shi—Shizuku?"

"Even I haven't even done this kind of rip-Onii-sama's-shirt-and-push-him-down play yet…!"

She was his reliable sister. But she was not his ally. Even as he pondered these complicated thoughts, Shizuku's anger had already boiled over to the point where she had materialized her own Device while facing Sara.

"Die!"

"Whoa! Shizuku, please stop! Things will get ugly if you use your Device in this place!"

At this point, there was no place for hesitation. Rounding quickly on his sister, he pinned her arms to her sides. Being lighter and physically weaker than himself, she could not break out of his squeeze, so for now there was no chance of a tragedy occurring.

Urgh—these glances from around us are so painful….

It was only natural of course, since they had made such a scene. In

any case, he needed a change of clothes, so a tactical retreat to his hotel room was the better option. But even as he thought this—

"Hahaha. I was wondering what this hullabaloo was all about. I do suppose that it is just you, hmm, Bloody Da Vinci?"

—a high voice rang out from their side, all theatrical intonation and affected dignity.

Part 4

Following the sound, his gaze fell upon an eyepatch-sporting girl in a crimson dress, and the maid attending her from behind. He remembered them as well. They were none other than Sara's compatriots in the attack on Hagun Academy—

"If I'm not mistaken, you're Kazamatsuri-san, formerly of Rentei Academy. Am I right?"

The eyepatch-wearing girl nodded in reply.

"Hahaha. Indeed, you may call me that. But this name and this visage are but a ruse to deceive the Dimension Administration Bureau. My true name eludes even all the tongues of man."

"My lady says, 'Yes, that's right. Pleased to meet you too.' Also, I ought to have mentioned this first, but I am Charlotte Cordé, my lady's personal maid. I am glad to be favored with your acquaintance."

"Ah, you don't have to be so formal."

Continuing after her master, Charlotte curtsied elegantly to Ikki and Shizuku. From this greeting, Ikki understood why he did not recognize this girl from the attack on Hagun Academy. The rest had all gained the right to compete as representatives from other schools, and he had been shown their pictures courtesy of Kagami. Charlotte however was a servant, neither a representative nor even a Blazer.

"Please excuse the discourtesy my comrade showed you, Worst One. That one did not bear you any ill-will, but she is haunted by the Muses, and thus unable to stop herself once inspiration comes upon her. Sheathe your blade as well, Lorelei. Your victory has long been decided."

"What?"

At Kazamatsuri's words, Ikki and Shizuku's gazes shifted in Sara's direction. There she was, laid out spread-eagle on the carpet floor.

"Did she… faint?"

"Char. Move the Bloody Da Vinci to an iPS Capsule."

"Please leave it to me. …Sara-sama, are you alright? I shall bring you to a Capsule."

"Kyuuu～"

Sara's eyes spun as she was Charlotte picked her up. It seemed like she had really lost consciousness. An elite of the underworld, taken out in one drop kick by Shizuku—physically disinclined as she was and possibly the lightest participant in this year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. The two siblings were unable to hide their surprise at Sara's unexpected frailty, and Kazamatsuri addressed this.

"An artist she is, but no warrior. It was unavoidable that she would be weak. Why, on her way here, she was accosted by clawing dead from the abyss, and had to be ferried here by angels in white."

"My lady says, 'After having arrived in Osaka, Sara-san broke a bone by tripping over a bump in a footpath and had to be taken here by an ambulance.'"

"Is she the protagonist of Sp●lunker[1]?!"

"That is why she is known as the 'Bloody Da Vinci'."

"You mean the blood's her own?! For such a cool nickname to hide such a horrible truth…."

"…Is Rebellion by any chance short on manpower?"

Shizuku muttered while still being held by Ikki, who expressed the same sentiments.

"Hahaha, if you think that way, you would have sorely missed the mark."

'Beastmaster' Rinna Kazamatsuri let out a mocking laugh.

"Of course, she is terrifyingly frail. But that does not mean she is in fact weak. For the truth is that she possesses power enough to mitigate these shortcomings, should she choose to fight. Pedestrian 'art', no matter how lifelike or intricate, is a mere counterfeit of

'reality', that spawn of an accursed god. But the art of the Bloody Da Vinci overturns reality. Before it, the works of gods and their ilk cannot even be considered third-rate. You would do well to heed this for your own sake."

At her words, Ikki and Shizuku remembered Sara's hand in the attack on Hagun. Those puppets of the Akatsuki members had seemed indistinguishable from humans, though it was also precisely because they were too lifelike that Ikki had been able to see through them.

Indeed, she is a formidable foe.

The way in which her ability would manifest itself on the battlefield was an unknown factor, which made it all the more ominous. They could not neglect to be wary of her.

Especially since I am in the same block as Bloodlily-san.

If the schedule was followed, he could meet her in the third round.

"Still, as expected of her, she has fine taste. You do look rather fetching up close, Worst One."

With a light leap, Kazamatsuri landed before him and like a small animal began to examine him from her lower vantage point.

"Uhh…."

"A mask that exudes not undue pressure, yet betrays not an immeasurable strength. That pleases me. Will you not become the butler of our house after you graduate? You will be treated well."

"Kuh! Are you also trying to target Onii-sama? I won't allow it!"

"Well, even if my sister were to allow it, I don't have any intention of allying myself to terrorists…."

"This does not mean that you will have to join Rebellion—you need

only see to my daily needs. That in itself shall be fine."

"Don't be fooled by her, Onii-sama! It is just a pretext under which she will use the master-servant relationship to do lewd things to you! If it was me, I would do the same!"

What should I do? I'm starting to think that my sister might be more dangerous than these terrorists… well, nevermind. Leaving that aside for now—

"Thank you for the kind offer, but allow me to demur. I'm terrible with suits."

Ikki declined Kazamatsuri's invitation. Of course, that she was a member of a terrorist group was one of his considerations, but over and above that—

"Hmm… but judging by your results, your prospects do not seem bright. In my camp you shall want for nothing, you know?"

"My lady, it is poor form to be so forceful. You are putting Ikki-sama on the spot."

Somehow, while it seemed as though Charlotte was imparting common-sense advice to Kazamatsuri, her hitherto stoic, quiet expression seemed to transform utterly whenever she looked—no, glared—glared at him enviously, as though he were her enemy.

If I had accepted, I would certainly be killed at some point.

No matter how comfortable the conditions, he did not desire a job environment in which assassination was an occupational hazard.

Kazamatsuri herself seemed unwilling to give the matter up, pursing her lips in a reluctant manner.

"Mmm… I understand. Nevertheless, you are welcome to contact me should you change your mind. Talented people like you will always

be welcome, Worst One."

So saying, she held her name-card out to Ikki. While he had no desire at all to become someone's butler, it would be far too impolite to suddenly return the card. So he thanked her, and took it instead.

With that final exchange ended, Kazamatsuri, Charlotte, and the unconscious Sara took their leave of the party together. After seeing them off, Ikki looked at the card he had been given, a wry smile creeping across his face as he did so. It had her name, mobile number, email address—even her address had been written there.

"I didn't think I would be getting a name card from a terrorist."

"Indeed, they're an eccentric lot. Coming to a party like it's normal, stripping people, handing out job offers… I wonder if everyone in Rebellion is weird like that."

"Come to think of it, Alice is somewhat odd too…."

The Akatsuki representatives were rather different from the normal image of underworld assassins. Even though Ikki and Shizuku understood that a person's strength could not be fully judged at a glance, as those who had come to harm at Akatsuki's hands they had imagined them to be more frightening, more violent. At this point, they could not deny that some of their rancor had all but dissipated.

But even as they thought thus—

"Don't lump me together with those idiots. It makes me sick."

—a retort came from behind them. As they turned to face the source of that angry voice, they were met by a girl with a head of long black hair, her face hidden behind a creepy mask.

Part5

"Really, these people are always doing something screwed up. You bastards aren't with us, can't they be more aware of that?"

The girl wearing a Phantom Of The Opera-esque mask complained bitterly while looking at the entrance of the reception room through which Kazamatsuri and the others had departed. Shizuku could not immediately piece together this girl's identity, but—

"Are you by any chance Akatsuki's Yui Tatara-san?"

—at her brother's words, she recalled her belatedly.

"Ah, you're that weirdo who was wearing winter-wear in summer like an idiot."

All wrapped up in winter clothing as she had been, they were unable to see her face at all, but now that Ikki had mentioned it her physical dimensions fit the girl at that time perfectly. Seeming displeased at the conclusions Shizuku drew, Tatara replied—

"I'm not weird! Do you even think showing your face in public to goddamn everybody is something a killer would do?"

This is the first time someone from Akatsuki said something that made sense…!

Shizuku suffered a mild shock. This person certainly seemed to fit the professional killer image better than the previous two. But—

"Is it really okay to acknowledge being a killer? Isn't the official story that you're a student?"

—Shizuku thought aloud. Tatara gave a throaty, contemptuous laugh.

"Heh heh heh. I'm sure you've already heard from the Black Assassin. The level of information control that Tsukikage possesses within Japan is flawless. No matter how much of a fuss you shits kick up, it would only be taken for idle talk by the public—so there's no

problem."

Hearing this, Shizuku raised her eyebrows. Tatara's words were the undeniable truth. In fact, Kurono had already informed the relevant authorities that Akatsuki Academy's students were mercenaries from Rebellion, but this fact had not been made known to the public. And even if the government had not worked to conceal this information, something like "our Prime Minister is actually colluding with terrorists", though the truth, was just too far-fetched to be believed. Thus, only those who were involved actually knew and believed that Akatsuki's students were terrorists from Rebellion. To those like her who knew the truth, this situation chagrined them greatly. After all, the present situation was simply playing into the enemy's hands. It was only natural that she would chafe under such ill-meaning provocation.

In response to her change in expression—

"…Heh heh. Don't make that scary face, Kurogane lassie. I said that, my bad. I'm on leave today anyway, so what say we just enjoy this party, eh?"

So saying, Tatara took some food from the table and offered it to Shizuku. Her attitude seemed friendly enough, but a contempt she could not quite conceal hung at the edge of her tongue—an apology that could only make one feel disgusted. But to so easily bite at bait proffered would grate on her all the more, and so she decided that she would let this slide.

"Thanks—"

But even as she decided this—the food was sent whirling through the air, before falling with a crash onto the marble floor.

Why—?

Her brother, who had been standing beside her, had knocked the offered plate from Tatara's hands.

"O-Oniisama?"

Shizuku's eyes grew wide with shock at her brother's actions. Indeed, the eyes of the whole room had turned to them at this sudden development. Her brother looked like a different person from the one who had spoken to Sara and Kazamatsuri, his eyes glinting coldly as he glared wordlessly at Tatara. What could have happened? Her doubtful gaze moved to the fallen platter.

"This… this is…!"

She understood the reasons for her brother's actions. The plate Tatara had offered her had contained chicken thigh on-the-bone, but within the meat one could see the gleaming of many shaving razors, likely having burst through the flesh from the impact of the fall. These could not have been part of the cooking process, but could only have been concealed within by someone of malicious intent. That person could be none other than the terrorist standing before her. Her brother noticed this, and had thus struck the plate down.

"That's quite the exciting topping, wouldn't you say, Tatara-san?"

"Heh, so wasteful! That was a special brew of various alkaloids. There was enough in there to kill an elephant with a single taste, you know."

Tatara chuckled, her shoulders shaking in fearless mirth despite Ikki's withering stare.

"I even did my best to conceal it. Unlike your sister, your senses are pretty damn good!"

"It wasn't that praiseworthy. You're practically oozing malice."

Ikki did not say this out of humility. Whereas his sister had not realized it, he had known from the beginning that Yui Tatara was different from the three they had met previously. They were merely eccentrics, from whom no malice could be felt. But from Tatara, he could feel nothing except malice. While she was picking up food to

pass to Shizuku, she had deliberately positioned herself in order to obscure their vision. There was no way she would have done nothing in that time. Firmly believing this, Ikki had knocked the plate to the floor. As it turned out, his hypothesis was right on target.

"Wasn't this your day off?"

"Heh heh. Aye, it is. That's why I wanted to kill someone to de-stress. Damn, I almost had it too, you know?"

Despite having her plot foiled, Tatara smacked her lips, showing not the slightest compunction for her deed.

"This is the first time I've had to do such slow-ass job. 'Go attack a school,' they said, 'but don't injure anyone'? I'm different from those idiots. I've been killin' since I was a brat. You want a pro to do a job where killing is forbidden, you don't come to me. I haven't had my fill, and that jus' pisses me off! …To hell with it, I'm not waiting two days, I'm gonna kill y'all right now!"

Showing a grin that was all teeth and menace, Tatara laughed as sinister energies gathered and took shape in her right hand. Her chainsaw Device, with its rows upon brutal rows of blades, brought to mind the maw of a shark.

「Hey hey, is this girl serious?」

「Is she just going to start right here?」

Tatara's violent, reckless disregard for decorum had the entire room in an uproar. For his part, Ikki did not respond to her, but instead moved in front of Shizuku as if to shield her. He understood that she was not the sort of person he could reason with. But beyond that, he thought while preparing to draw his own Device *Intetsu*, he wasn't the sort of saint who would forgive the person who had tried to poison his sister—

"Stand down, Crownless Sword King."

"Tch!"

The commotion was quieted—no, was silenced—by a voice that rang out from behind. It was not shouted, nor did it sound angry. In fact it was a quiet thing. Yet it was larger than life, exuding a pressure that compelled its listeners to follow.

Ikki knew this voice. Though he had never heard it in the flesh, He had heard it broadcasted on TV countless times. Its owner was—

"You didn't claw your way up here just to get into this sort of petty quarrel, did you?"

"…Moroboshi-san!"

—none other than Yuudai Moroboshi. Third-year of Bukyoku Academy. Japan's Seven Stars Sword King—and the Worst One's opponent in the first round of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Part 6

A sharp gaze like that of a majestic predator, Standing, like Arisuin, around 1.8 meters in height with the muscles to match. Topped off with a bandanna that befitted his strapping stature—that was Yuudai Moroboshi, the man at the summit of Japan's student knights. With a word, he had frozen the fog of blood-thirst around them.

He was also not alone in approaching Ikki and the others. At his sides stood a male and a female student, who like him were dressed not in suits but in the modern-styled yet unique uniform of Bukyoku

Academy. Of course, they too were known to Ikki. The bespectacled third-year student knight Byakuya Jougasaki was on one side, his uniform crisp and immaculate. On the other stood third-year Momiji Asagi, with a bandage on her cheek and a mischievous twinkle in her eye like that of a much younger girl. They were the first and second runner up, respectively. Indeed, the ones who now stood as a barrier between Ikki and Tatara were the three standing on the podium of last year's Festival.

No wonder my body froze up back there.

Standing in a line with one another, they were shrouded in an extraordinary aura, the pressure of which was such that being close to them would make the reception room suddenly seem smaller. Ignoring such a presence was impossible.

"What a dangerous girl, going around saying 'kill this, kill that'. Well, it's not that I can't understand the feeling of your blood boiling now that the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is so close… but how about cooling down a little?"

They had in all likelihood been watching from the sidelines since earlier. Moroboshi didn't seem to be rebuking Ikki, but rather directed his somewhat monotonous lecture down at Tatara. Then, as though to follow up—

"Indeed. To unleash your Device in this place truly puts your character under suspicion…. Well, they do say that a vulgar Device reflects its wielder."

Jougasaki also attacked Tatara's behaviour.

"Character ain't any good in a fight, you poseur. Want me to teach that to ya using yer body?"

Revving up the engine on her chainsaw Device, she pointed its edge at Moroboshi, the one furthest in front among the three.

"Don't bare your fangs so impertinently. It makes you seem like a

weak dog."

That insult, coming forth with a sigh, was more than enough to rile up the already wild-tempered Tatara, who seemed to convulse and spasm with laughter.

"Hee hee hee. You brats…. Fine. Then you'll find out right here if I'm weak or—"

She advanced towards Moroboshi, murder now supplanting malice in following her steps—and suddenly stopped, as though jolted by lightning, a full three meters way.

"Oh?"

Moroboshi spoke, impressed.

"So you aren't just for show. See, that's the extent of my reach. If you were to step inside carelessly… *whoosh*, I'd jab you with this guy here."

He had at some point summoned a sleek Chinese-style spear into his hands. Its point was ramrod straight, its tassel flowing like a tiger's fur—this was the Seven Stars Sword King's Device, *Tora-Ou*[2].

"Bastard, when did you—"

Tatara retreated several steps back in her surprise. But she was not the only one surprised. Ikki was, too.

That's amazing….

Even with eyes like his, he had not been able to catch the blade materializing. Beyond that—

—It's as if he has no openings.

Even though Moroboshi was merely holding his spear, there were no

blind spots within his attack range; regardless of where the enemy came from, he would be able to meet them. Ikki could clearly see how this would make things difficult for him in the future.

This is the first time I'm seeing it… so this is the Seven Stars Sword King's rumored Happo Nirami[3]*, huh.*

Happo Nirami—a control over attack range so absolute that even Raikiri had not been able to penetrate it; a discernment of the enemy regardless of their position or angle of attack, to a level of perfection that had earned it its moniker. Even Tatara would have to hesitate to enter this space, for the reach of Yuudai Moroboshi was nothing less than the reach of the number one student knight in Japan. Then—

"Gahahahaha! Man, the first years this year sure are spirited, eh? Not bad, not bad!"

Apparently those who had followed the commotion here were not limited to the students from Bukyoku, as a black shadow followed that almost megaphone-like voice and laughter, casting itself over Ikki and the others. Standing before them now was one who hardly looked like a student. Easily over two meters tall and nearly half as broad, the huge man also sported a beard. This was the previous festival's quarter-finalist, the Panzer Grizzly who hailed from the northern continent of Hokkaido—Rokuzon Academy's third-year Renji Kaga.

"Still, wasting food just ain't right. Our farmers worked hard to raise this delicious chicken so we might enjoy eating it. It would be wrong to not repay them by feasting."

So saying, Kaga, of whom urban legend held to have cleared 100 hectares—the equivalent of around twenty Tokyo Domes—worth of land for cultivation by himself in his elementary school days, picked up with one large hand the poisoned and blade-filled chicken that Ikki had knocked to the ground.

"Ah, that chicken is—!"

Ikki's warning came too late to stop him from tossing the chicken, bones and all, into his mouth. As he worked his mighty jaws, meat, bones and blades alike were crushed by his teeth and then swallowed.

"Gahaha! That could kill an elephant, but it couldn't kill me, eh, Akatsuki?"

"…Is this guy really human?"

Nothing in the slightest seemed wrong with Kaga despite having swallowed deadly poison—indeed, it was Tatara instead who looked a little green in the face. However, her day of surprises would not end here.

"Fu～♡"

A breath air blew from behind Tatara's ear, causing her to notice something she hadn't realized till just then—that she was being held in a woman's embrace.

"Alriiight, that's a good girl. Your body checkup is in progress, so please stay still for a bit~"

"Gaaaah!"

Tatara forcefully pushed the young woman away, escaping her bodily ministrations, but despite her quick reactions there was panic written all over her face. She was a hitman well-known among Rebellion's young blood. Her skill was the real deal and she knew it. As such, being grabbed by someone without her noticing would of course be cause for panic.

"Who the hell are you…!"

"Haha—♡ My, my, what a lively kranke[4]. It's good to be lively, you know~"

Tatara's voice trembled with panic, but her abruptly-arrived assailant on the other hand spoke with a composed smile on her pouty lips.

"How~ever. As I thought, an excited state, high blood pressure, and a high body temperature. And with that small body and that rough skin, you do look like you lack nutrition. Show me your hands~"

The instant she finished saying that—

"You bastard, what did you doooooooo!?"

Against her will, Tatara let go of her chainsaw and stretched her hands out to the young woman in white, palms up. Just as Tatara had been asked. And into those hands—

"Please take in more calcium, vitamin C and collagen. Also, here, this is an aroma oil I synthesized personally. Burning some before going to bed will help calm your high spirits."

—the young woman placed a cute ribbon-tied bag full of tablets, pills and capsules, smiling all the while. Of course, Tatara didn't need these things. In fact, she intended to immediately smash them onto the floor, but—

I-I can't move!

"Bastard, what did you do to me?!"

"Mmm～? Fufu—♡ Is it so surprising? It's normal that a doctor should be able to do whatever she wants to a patient～♪"

Tatara was absolutely sweating now as she roared angrily, but the young woman remained all smiles. Seeing that exchange, Ikki turned to Shizuku and asked—

"Shizuku… do you know about her?"

His sister nodded slightly.

"Yes, of course. I know her."

Shizuku was not the sort to do in-depth research into the nation's elite. Most of those here were unknown to her. But this young woman in white was different. Even as a student, she was Japan's top doctor, and also a national-level knight.

"Rentei Academy third-year—the 'White-Robed Knight' Kiriko Yakushi."

This was the only water user in the country whom Shizuku considered superior to herself.

"Given that she hadn't participated in her first or second years, I didn't think she would participate this year either, but…."

"That aside, that technique she used when she was restraining Tatara-san, was that by any chance—"

"Yes, it is as you thought, Onii-sama. Without a doubt, that is something similar to my Aoiro Rinne… however, I am unable to vaporize my clothing along with myself."

Also, Shizuku could not perceive the technique by dint of which Tatara's freedom of movement had been taken away from her. It might have been some sort of interference conducted with the target's blood—as things stood, she could only speculate this far on techniques that she could not yet use.

To be in D-Block with this person makes me a little depressed.

They were both of the water element, and both leaned towards the use of techniques. Thus, even a small difference in the refinement of said techniques could spell the difference between victory and defeat. They might meet in the third round of the Festival, but Shizuku hoped that Yakushi would be defeated before then.

There was also a familiar face among the national-level knights attracted to the commotion, someone Ikki remembered with not a little nostalgia.

"Hey, runt. Who gave you permission to go after the Worst One. Huh?"

Cutting through the crowd, a golden-haired young man grabbed Tatara by the collar roughly. This was Donrou Academy's ace, 'Sword Eater' Kuraudo Kurashiki. He and Ikki had once crossed swords during the incident involving Hagun's third-year Ayase Ayatsuji, during which his natural-born gift 'Marginal Counter' had given Ikki a hard time.

"Kurashiki-kun… it's been a while."

"Hmph. Thought you'd come here. I'm gonna return the favor from that time."

Having said that, Kuraudo turned back to Tatara, whom he had lifted up into the air and warned her sharply.

"It's not just me. Everyone here's looking forward to go a round or two with this guy. You try anything funny before then, and I'll crush you."

As though to affirm his words, all present glared daggers at her. At this, even someone as violent-tempered as Tatara could not persist. All those gathered here were at least at the level of a quarter-finalist of the national level. Taking them on all at once was a gamble with no prospects of victory.

"…Tch! Let go!"

Unable to use her arms freely, she escaped Kuraudo's grip by kicking him backwards before leaving the scene, her face a writhing mix of loathing and shame. She could not do anything else.

Part 7

After Tatara made her exit from the reception room, Ikki turned to thank those that had gathered.

"Thank you very much, everyone. A little longer, and I would have succumbed to her provocations."

At the sight of his bowed head, the tremendously sharp expression that Moroboshi had earlier when facing Tatara shifted into a sunny smile.

"It's all good! It's only normal to get mad if someone goes after your little sister. And you never drew your sword—if it was me, I would have drawn before she did."

Then he laughed, as if to say 'don't worry about it'. At this, Jougasaki sighed.

"That's not something you should be proud of, Yuu… as the number one student knight in Japan, the Seven Stars Sword King, you need to be an example to the rest. Could you please be a bit more level-headed?"

"Ahaha. Well, Hosshi *is* a siscon."

"Who's a siscon!? Anyone would do that as an older brother! And this is the second time those guys have come to Hagun looking for trouble, you know? Even a Buddha would get pissed the third time, so why not mere humans like us on the second? Don't you think so too, Kurogane?"

"Haha… certainly, they've only given us a hard time so far."

Ikki nodded, agreeing with Moroboshi's views on the various attacks.

"However, I don't only feel anger and resentment towards them."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"It's true that they've given us a horrible time of it, and I don't bear them any goodwill. But thanks to their participation, we are able to cross swords with Blazers that we wouldn't be able to in normal battles. With respect to that alone, well, I would thank them."

He meant what he said. A Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival in which they would be able to go up against people from a world that would not normally be open to them was exactly what he wanted. This way, the level of competition to decide the strongest knight at this year's Festival would be higher. So, if only for this one point, Ikki held some goodwill towards Akatsuki. Upon hearing this, Moroboshi began to laugh loudly.

"…Heh heh, hahahaha! You look like you wouldn't hurt a fly, but you say some interesting stuff! What a coincidence—I feel the same way!"

Indeed, he and Ikki felt exactly the same way. That this Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was worth competing in. He had wished for a death-match with the Sword Emperor of Wind for a long time now. As such he had Akatsuki to thank, if only for pulling Ouma out into the fray.

"Still, I hadn't thought that there would be someone else here who

was as hot-blooded as me."

And to think that it would be a student from Hagun Academy, who had actually come to harm by Akatsuki's hands. A normal person wouldn't have been able to say such things, but he had been able to—

…That means that he also understands—

"People with whom crossing swords normally would be unthinkable, you say…? So it seems the rumor that Akatsuki are underworld mercenaries is true, huh."

"That shorty from earlier wasn't ordinary either. Just doing whatever she wanted… really!"

"Eh, is that even important?"

Having heard this, Jougasaki and Asagi expressed their dissatisfaction. Moroboshi however dismissed the news with indifference.

"No matter who they are, how we do things isn't gonna change, eh, Kurogane?"

Ikki nodded and replied with a friendly, gentle smile.

"Indeed. As knights, we shouldn't expect any sort of justice or fairness from our enemies."

That was the answer that Moroboshi had hoped for. As he had suspected, Ikki understood the essence of being a student knight. They were not merely sportsmen. They would eventually be warriors responsible for the country's defense. To take offense simply because the illegality of an opponent was barking up the wrong tree, and those who could not understand this—regardless of how strong they were—were in the end only sportspeople. They stood no chance against true knights.

"In the first place, there is nothing just about an enemy, nor anything fair about combat. As student knight, that is par for the course in our battles. No matter who they are or what means they used to participate in this Festival, that has nothing to do with us. The discussion of their illegality can be left to the adults organizing this event. We only need to defeat the enemy in front of us."

Ikki was very aware of this. That was why he had not exposed Ayase Ayatsuji's rule-breaking in order to win by forfeit, or criticize her for cowardice when they had fought, even though as a friend he lamented her actions. He disdained foul play, but neither did he reject it per se, and thus would not ask for fairness from an opponent. He was not a sportsman. He was a warrior.

The Seven Stars Sword King Moroboshi Yuudai was able to get Ikki's measure from what little conversation they had had, and having ascertained that, he gave him his acknowledgement.

"Haha… to be honest, I was disappointed when I heard that Raikiri had been defeated by some repeater—I was planning to completely shut out her trump card this year. But the fellow who came up to replace her is pretty interesting."

This man was a worthy opponent.

"I look forward to meeting you in the ring two days from now."

"I'll give it everything I've got."

Moroboshi's fighting spirit surged as he said this, and Ikki met his challenging gaze firmly as he replied. Of course, Moroboshi was not the only one measuring his opponent. Ikki had done the same, using the conversation to get the measure of the present Seven Stars Sword King. The answer he had received was also the same. This first battle was likely to be a life-or-death crisis for him, he sensed. This filled him with an uneasiness, but also with much greater anticipation. So there they stood, gazes locked, two men who shared the same beliefs, neither giving an inch—

"Ah, right. That."

Moroboshi spoke offhandedly, reminding Ikki with the tension gone from his voice.

"Isn't it about time you went back and got changed? Your chest is visible."

"Buh!?"

Ikki finally remembered. All this time, he had been standing here with the front of his suit totally open, like some kind of creepy deviant.

"Or did you want to show off the body that you're proud of? You into that kind of thing?"

"Th-That's not it at all!"

Ikki denied, going beet red as he attempted frantically to cover his exposed chest, much to the laughter and amusement of those around him. At that moment, the atmosphere that had crackled with tension due to Tatara's appearance utterly dissipated, and the peaceful time of recreation that was the dinner party resumed.

Part 8

In a smoking room next to the reception area, a dark red-suited man watched the commotion Tatara and the others were creating from a window, his eyes seeming to narrow behind his tinted glasses. Who was he?

"I see you have some awfully ill-mannered students, Tsukikage-sensei."

Indeed. This man was Tsukikage Bakuga, at once both Japan's current

prime minister and Akatsuki's sponsor. Hearing his name being called, he turned, and recognizing the voice's owner replied in a voice that seemed pleased.

"Oh, if it isn't Takizawa-kun. It's been a while."

'Takizawa-kun'. At being called by that name, Hagun Academy's Board Chairman Shinguuji Kurono stiffened a little. The sound of his voice as he said her maiden name reminded her of her school days, of the Tsukikage-sensei she had admired. It was almost like he'd never changed. Lighting a cigarette shakily, she took a puff to calm herself. Only then did she correct him.

"It's Shinguuji now, Sensei."

"Ah, that's right. We haven't seen each other since your wedding. So, how has it been? Have you been well?"

"The delivery went without a hitch. Thank you for your concern."

"That's good, that's good. Nothing is better than to be well, yes."

A smile crept over Tsukikage face, deepening more lines than she remembered had been there. He seemed genuinely happy for her good health, this much she had little reason to doubt. But it was

precisely this that led to her troubled expression.

Sensei… really hasn't changed.

His gentle voice, his warm smile, were all now as they were then. As they were in the days when she had looked up to him. If only he had changed. If only he would display enmity, show malice, how good that would be. If only he did this—

Why would that Tsukikage-sensei do these things?

—she would not need to be tormented by such doubts. But she suppressed these feelings, and spoke up.

"Personally, it was not at all my intention that we should meet again under such circumstances."

Her enmity filled the countenance that she directed towards Tsukikage. Right now, she was no longer his pupil. She was the head of Hagun Academy—and he was the head of Akatsuki Academy, the ones who had hurt her students. An unforgivable enemy. A hated foe. This was the unshakable truth, and thus there was no need for farce or frivolity. She only needed to seek confirmation. Confirmation as to why he would do such things, and the true meaning behind those actions. She knew her role perfectly well. So as opposed to Tsukikage, whose stance in all this was unknown, she made her position clear.

Tsukikage responded, acknowledging her enmity as well-founded.

"Haha. Well, of course. Of course you would be angry. I did use your school as a stepping stone, after all."

In doing so, he was admitting that not only did he know that his actions would cause harm, but that it was precisely because he knew it would cause harm to her and Hagun that he had acted. Having obtained this testimony, she pressed on in her questioning.

"Why did you have to do something like that?"

"It is as I said at the press conference. Blazers are the keystone of our national security, and yet we have left the bulk of their training to a foreign institution. This is to say nothing of our having given over the right to issue licenses to our knights, we don't even have the freedom to revoke those licenses. Under these circumstances, it is hard to call our country healthy, don't you think so? As the one who bears the nation on his shoulders, I am merely acting to right these wrongs."

There was nothing new in his reply, only what he had told the media at the press conference before.

"I don't think this is truly all there is to it. You're hiding something, Sensei."

"Oh no, of course not. As someone who took up Bukyoku Academy's path and instituted ground-breaking reforms in your own school, I had thought you would understand what I am trying to do here, Shinguuji-kun."

"I'm sorry, but that your actions exceed my field of comprehension. It's true that Bukyoku Academy managed to reap significant results under Makunouchi's directorship from the adoption of its own school culture, rules and methods of teaching that strayed from the League's guidelines. It is also true that he became regarded as a thorn in the League's side because of this. However, everything he did was still within the confines of common sense. What you've done is decisively different, Sensei. You've hired terrorists! That's something against the law!"

"What, terrorists? I'm afraid that given my position, I'd have to say I don't know what you're talking about."

In the face of her strong retort, Tsukikage merely gave her a wry grin, feigning ignorance to the end. Realizing that further direct questioning was fruitless, a seed of despair began to spring up within her.

"But you know, lawlessness is good."

Tsukikage spoke with his voice eerily cold.

"Lawlessness is needed in order to destroy these misbegotten laws."

That was all she needed. Kurono had not come here utterly unprepared. She had done her homework, researching and hypothesizing. Mulling over the various possibilities and motives that lay behind Tsukikage's present actions. As such, she could put it all together.

"Sensei, you… that's it, isn't it?"

His previous words. His stance on using extralegal methods. Those were missing pieces of the puzzle she needed to discover his true motives… and they pointed toward the worst scenario she had come up with.

"What do you mean by 'that's it'?"

"'Taking back the right to train our Blazers'… I always found this phrase strange. Setting up a national academy, choosing terrorists from Rebellion as its students, using them to make a splash at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, and thus making the national academy's position unassailable—all to do that? It's just too extreme."

Given Japan's position within the League, the goal of taking back the right to train Blazers by itself was not a difficult thing to ask. Japan was the third-richest country in the world, an economic powerhouse. It was also tolerant of different religions and value-systems, and as such had come to play a key role in bringing nations of different faiths together by serving as a go-between. In short, it was an indispensable nation, one the League Mage-Knight Nations could no longer do without. Thus if they negotiated for something on the level of taking back the right to train Blazers in earnest, they would almost certainly get it. If this request was rejected and Japan thus left the League, the latter stood to lose more than they would gain.

"Regaining the right to train our Blazers is not beyond our diplomatic options. As such, it is simply abnormal for the leader of a nation to

have to hire terrorists and stir up civil unrest in order to do so. These means are too extreme for the end, and that always disturbed me. But what you said has led me to believe that the *order of the argument should be reversed*. In other words, you don't need to use extralegal methods to obtain this goal. You only need to use this goal as an excuse to use extralegal methods."

"And why would I do this? What reason would I have?"

"I wouldn't claim to understand your personal motives, Sensei, but that is irrelevant to my hypothesis. But at this point, you could only have one reason for doing this. You don't want to negotiate with the League, because that would mean that in exchange for regaining our sovereignty over Blazer training, Japan would continue to remain a part of the League. If that were to happen, your real goal, Sensei—to drive an irreparable wedge between Japan and the League of Mage-Knight Nations—would all come to naught!"

Kurono was sure that this was Tsukikage's true objective. Her report to the League branch office on the relation between Rebellion and Akatsuki had no doubt reached headquarters by now. And as for the League, they would not now acquiesce to come to the table of negotiation with Japan. After all, that would be giving in to terrorists. Tsukikage had used the means he had knowing this would happen. Indeed, he had used them in hopes that this would happen, all so he might achieve his true objective—a decisive split between Japan and the League of Mage-Knight Nations.

"Hahaha. As I would have expected of you, Takizawa-kun. You were always very smart."

He confirmed her beliefs with surprising levity.

"Now that you've gotten this far, it would be embarrassing to continue hiding it. The gist of it, well, is as you have said. My endgame is that we would cut all ties between ourselves and the League of Mage-Knight Nations."

"But why? …Has some country out there managed to buy even one

such as you over?"

"Of course not. I have not sold out or anything of the sort. What I have done, I did it all for the nation…. Japan does not need to remain under a collective of weaklings like the League of Mage-Knight Nations. This country has the power to maintain its sovereignty. And even if we were to remain, it would be of no benefit to ourselves—all we would be doing is cleaning up after the messes of others."

"…Tch."

At his words, Kurono's expression darkened a shade. There was a measure of truth to what he had said. The League of Mage-Knight Nations was, in essence, an multilateral cooperative. When member states were invaded by non-member states, it would serve as a pipeline ferrying supplies and troops swiftly to the affected area—not altogether different in nature from medical insurance. In other words, if a country was not afflicted with the disease of war, not only would it not reap the benefits of this arrangement, but also have to continue paying to support other countries. Vietnam, Iraq, Israel—throughout the last 5 decades, Japan had not once engaged in a war with another nation, but had nonetheless had to provide troops and resources time and time again. This burden was by no means light, and the belief that this arrangement was disadvantageous was prevalent among the citizenry. It was against this political backdrop that the pro-secession faction that Tsukikage now spearheaded had grown powerful. Thus, Kurono could understand his point of view. And yet—

"Have you thought about this seriously!? Do you really believe that this country, lacking in natural resources as it is, can stand as an equal of the three great powers—China, Russia and America?"

She thought otherwise. Indeed, the burden of maintaining its seat in the Federation was great. Calling it a disadvantageous arrangement was not wrong. And yet the League's aegis had indeed protected Japan for the last fifty years—this was the truth. What would become of them if they lost that shield? That was beyond her imagination—and it was for that reason that she was terrified of

Tsukikage's actions, these actions that might result in massive changes to not only Japan, but also to the global superstructure.

Unlike her, however, Tsukikage seemed completely unperturbed. His voice filled with certainty.

"Of course. I shall surely reclaim the glory and the territory that this country should possess by right."

"And for that, you'd use any means necessary?"

"Indeed. Akatsuki was created for this purpose, and they will surely take this Festival. And with that, the people will no longer look to the League of Mage-Knight Nations. This plan of mine can no longer be stopped."

"Haha. You look like you do not understand. But that is fine. In any case, I did not require your understanding—freedom of thought is a citizen's right, after all. You can criticize me. You can be disappointed in me. But I am the leader of this nation. Its direction is mine to determine. I will not allow anyone to get in my way."

One could feel the strength of his will, looming like a mountain, as he said those words. And having concluded so, he extinguished the embers of his cigarette stub upon the ashtray, leaving her these words as he made for the exit of the smoking room.

"This is no longer a situation in which a single educator like you can meddle. You would do well to understand your position."

He spoke as he passed by her, as though he were a teacher again, lecturing his errant pupil. That was when she understood that their paths had already diverged. His receding footsteps told the same story—that he no longer wished to remain here, and that she had no power to stop him.

Nonetheless.

"It's true, Sensei, that your ambition isn't an affair that a teacher like

me can do anything about."

She addressed him, though her back remained turned.

"But only if Akatsuki Academy does emerge victorious in this Festival."

Her voice reverberated strongly in the room despite its softness.

"In that case, I can still crush your ambitions through my students, without having to do anything myself."

Of this, she was certain. Tsukikage's hand turned the doorknob, and then he stopped.

"I'm looking forward to it. To their performance as Akatsuki's supporting cast, that is."

Leaving these words behind, he departed from the room.

So it was that Kurono Shinguuji discerned the true intentions that Tsukikage held. But until the end of the tournament, she did not divulge any of what she had learned here to Ikki and the others. She did not put the fate of the country in their hands, for this would have been no different from gambling on the result of the tournament.

It's fine. They don't have to know of these under-table dealings or these ulterior motives.

They only needed to fight for themselves. If they did so—they would surely be victorious. Kurono had been here before at the summit, and while there she had fought a furious battle with the Yaksha Princess, so she understood this—that as strong as Akatsuki's members were, they had one decisive flaw. They did not hold any passion for the stage known as the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

To expect to be the last man standing? Absurd. It might have been possible for other battlefields, but not this one. For the Seven Stars

Sword-Art Festival, emerging victorious without that passion was simply impossible.

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1. : Spelunker, a platforming video game from 1983 in which the player character descends a cave.

2. *Tora-Ou*, 虎王: "Tiger King"

3. *Happo Nirami*, 八方睨み: "Glare in All Directions"

4. *Kranke*: "Patient", as in person suffering from disease, in German.

Chapter 2: The Star of Naniwa

Part 1

It was the day after the party; in other words, the day before the Festival's opening. Ikki, Shizuku and Arisuin were heading towards the hotel lobby, having planned to eat dinner out on the last day before the tournament. The trigger for this had been something that happened last night at the party. The party had for lasted about an hour after Ikki had returned, having changing out of the clothes Sara had torn.

「Say, Kurogane. Have you decided where you'll be eating for tomorrow's dinner?」

As the festivities were winding down, Moroboshi had suddenly asked this of Ikki and Shizuku.

「Well, I haven't, but I think eating at the hotel restaurant would do.」

「Oh, come on, that no good! You finally came all the way here to Osaka, so you should try the local food!」

Ikki hadn't thought very hard about his answer, and from Moroboshi's frank reply it seemed Moroboshi agreed.

「Mm, that's true. But what's good to eat in Osaka?」

「There's the teppanyaki[1]. The takoyaki[2] ain't bad, but that's just a snack. For meals, I guess okonomiyaki[3] is best.」

「But Onii-sama, we've already had okonomiyaki in Tokyo at Rangetsu[4].」

「Idiot! That's like saying you've had Nagasaki Champon[5] after having only gone to Ringer Hut[6]! It lacks that local flavor… alright, that's settled, we're having okonomiyaki for dinner tomorrow. I'm bringin' you guys to the best okonomiyaki place here in Osaka!」

「Uh, um-」

「I'll meet you guys in the lobby at five, then!」

…and that was how their present schedule had somehow come to be.

"Really, what a scarily overbearing person. Are all Osakans like that?"

"Well, no, I don't think that's the case…."

"Nonetheless, I'm glad you invited me along. I've never had okonomiyaki before, so I was thinking of trying some since we've come all the way out here."

"Really? Then you could have just told us."

"I would have felt bad about bringing you two with me. You have to prepare for your matches tomorrow, you know?"

Indeed, this would normally be the case. The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was not a league-style tournament. One loss meant the end of the road, and as such each match had to be approached with utmost focus. On the day before they would have their first battle, most people would want to stay focused, and would hence normally shy away from such invitations to go out.

"But I didn't think that someone competing tomorrow would invite you two out."

And it wasn't just anyone competing the next day who invited them,

either. It was the two-time winner of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, someone who bore pressure on his shoulders in a different dimension from that which Ikki or any other contestant for that matter did, and Ikki's opponent, no less.

"He sure has an absurd amount of nerve. Doesn't he ever feel embarrassed?"

"If he did, he wouldn't have invited us."

"Well, it doesn't matter to me since I'm not the sort to get nervous, but will you be fine, Onii-sama? You're too nice, so if you find it hard to refuse him I can do it for you."

Her tone held a note of concern, because this had happened to Ikki before during his representative selection battle with the 'Hunter'. In that battle, his nervousness had gotten him off to a terrible start. Shizuku hoped that if only for today, no one would disturb her brother or get in his way till the battle began. As such, she could not but sound a little prickly when she spoke of Moroboshi.

"It's fine. This does feel a little forced, but if I was against it I would have said so."

Ikki said, asserting he was here of his own will, instead of merely going with the flow. This was the truth.

"Honestly, he's right. It's rare that we would be out here in Osaka, away from Tokyo. I'd really like to try some of the iconic local cuisine. And anyway…."

"Anyway?"

"As opposed to sitting in my room meditating alone, sharing a table with the Seven Stars Sword King seems more fun."

Simply put, Ikki was interested in Yuudai Moroboshi as a person. If Ikki wanted to know about Moroboshi's strengths or his abilities, there were many methods available. By contrast, there were very few

opportunities to get to know him as a person, to get a taste of his views, his way of life.

This, the Worst One felt to be far more important than simply maintaining his focus.

Arisuin commented, flabbergasted.

"I… don't think you would lose to him in terms of having some serious nerve."

It should have been reasonable, even normal to feel awkward going out for a meal with someone you would fight the very next day, but it seemed like such simple ideas did not apply to Ikki.

"Hey, over here, over here!"

As they stepped out of the lobby and the hotel entrance, they found Moroboshi waiting for them in front of a fountain.

"Sorry, did you wait long?"

"No, you're right on time."

Moroboshi replied as they hurried up to him.

"I just couldn't wait, so don't worry about it."

Then he glanced at Arisuin.

"Oh, and who's this cool guy here?"

Even though Arisuin had once been a representative, and hence should have had his photo circulated, it seemed that Moroboshi did not recognize him even as Moroboshi continued looking in his direction. He had not come to the party either, after all.

Shizuku stepped forward while gesturing towards said person.

"This is Nagi Arisuin. He's my friend and a fellow student at Hagun Academy."

"In any case, you didn't mention how many people you were inviting. Is this fine?"

"Don't worry, it's cool! The more the merrier. Anyway, you might already know about me, but here goes. I'm Bukokyu's Moroboshi."

Introducing himself thus, he stuck out his right hand to offer Arisuin a handshake.

"You're too kind. I'm Alice."

Seeing no reason to deny such a polite introduction, Arisuin took his hand.

"Hehehe, you sound rough, but you're actually quite the gentleman. I like that in a man."

"…Whaaa!?"

Moroboshi, like any other man would if he were told that by a man he had only just met, shuddered at the smoldering look in Arisuin's eyes.

"Uhh… I'm sorry," he asked, his expression rather bewildered. "But is this some sort of joke?"

"Oh no, I'm being serious, you know~? For I am a maiden in a man's body."

"Oh… oh. So that, that's how it is, huh. Must be tough…."

"My, such firm hands."

Arisuin murmured as his long, sleek fingers stroked the back of Moroboshi's right hand.

"Just as one would expect from someone as stalwart as the Seven Stars Sword King."

"Uwaaaaaaa!"

Moroboshi all but leaped back in terror.

"Alice. Stop teasing him."

"Ha ha. Sorry. Don't worry, Moroboshi-san, I was just joking~"

"Eh… ah, ahaha. I see, I see, so it was just a joke. I've just never met an okama before, so I was kinda shocked."

"Don't worry, I won't lay a hand on a straight man."

"…So you weren't joking about the okama part…."

Ikki thought with a touch of nostalgia.

This really takes me back to the time when I first met Alice.

Moroboshi's reaction was like a repeat of his own just a few months ago.

Well, I've gotten pretty used to it, but at the start it was a real surprise.

Moroboshi cleared his throat. He did seem more adaptable, though.

"W-Well, I guess it's all good. Gay men, straight men, we all eat the same stuff, yes?"

Having been restored to his usual self, Moroboshi then turned to Ikki.

"By the way, the Crimson Princess isn't here either. Has she not arrived yet?"

"Mm. She will, in all likelihood, only just about make it here

tomorrow."

"I see. That's too bad, then."

Moroboshi sighed, seeming genuinely disappointed.

Ikki understood his feelings. After all, it was also with that intent to see those that he would soon do battle with that he had gone to the party yesterday. The A-rank knight Crimson Princess… of course she would be someone that the Seven Stars Sword King would want to mee—

"Man, I was looking forward to see her wring me dry of cash. She sure looked like she could eat—"

"Eh? Moroboshi-san, did you just say somethin—"

"Ah—nah, nahaha! Nah, it was nothing, jus' talkin' to myself!"

That wasn't nothing, Ikki thought. His eyes were shifty, his behavior suspicious. He had almost certainly said something under his breath earlier.

But Moroboshi gave him no time to think too hard about it.

"Well, would ya look at the time! Shall we go?"

Stepping forward, he motioned for them to come along.

"There aren't as many people as in Tokyo, but the commercial strip's plenty crowded at this time—mind you don't get lost!"

Part 2

The commercial strip was a ten minute ride away from the train station closest to the Bay Dome[7], and with Moroboshi leading the

way right out of the train gates, the four of them plunged headfirst into the bowels of its arcades.

「Ah! It's Moroboshi!」

「Oh, it's actually that idiot Moroboshi! The hell are you doing? Don't you have a match coming up?」

「You're the idiot, you little shit! The match is tomorrow, 'innit?」

「Hoshi-chan, we're looking forward to your victory this year too!」

「Couldn't get a seat at the Dome this year, but we'll be watching you from the TV in the strip!」

"Ahaha, leave it to me!"

「Yuu-chan, we're going to play mahjong with Taku-san today, you wanna come along?」

"Sorry, I'm showing some guests from Tokyo around the place. Next time!"

「Hoshi, you win this year, I'll treat you to some otoro[8] next time!」

"Seriously? You'd better remember that later, old man!"

「But if you lose, better get ready. Imma stuff a whole tube of wasabi up your nose!」

All sorts of people called out to him as he passed through the streets. Giving support, pep talks, even teasing him—they engaged him in different ways, but their expressions were warm and familiar.

"Moroboshi-san is really popular."

Shizuku mumbled, a little taken aback at the scene before her.

"Even Stella-san didn't create this kind of commotion when she was out on the street."

"Well, Stella was popular, but she was also an exchange student. There's no way she could match the current Seven Stars Sword King in terms of local popularity."

The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival was broadcast on national TV, and as such it was a given that participants would have or gain their own fans, whether within their own schools or outside. As the one who dominated that stage, the Seven Stars Sword King would naturally have many more of these than was the norm.

"Multiple victories in a row at the Festival is a feat no one has achieved before, and what's more, he's a homegrown hero, so of course people's hopes would be on him."

"Haha, he really is somebody, to be able to bear the weight of his hometown's expectations by himself without showing it."

Ikki agreed with them.

"Indeed, he really is a great guy. To be able to receive and take on the expectations of all these people, even after having gone through something like that."

"Onii-sama, what did you mean by 'something like that'?"

"Eh? …Oh, right. So you don't know about it?"

Ikki frowned both inwardly and outwardly at Shizuku's reaction. 'That' which he had let slip was a fairly famous episode in Moroboshi's past—it was famous enough that from Arisuin's expression, he had also heard of it. For Shizuku to not have done so could only be because she took no interest in others. Or perhaps she had, due to that disinterest, once heard of it but forgotten soon thereafter. As such, there was no real need to hide it, but was it really a good idea to say this with the man himself within earshot? They could still be painful memories even now.

What should I do?

Fortunately for Ikki, Moroboshi was presently answering the cheers of his fans, so Ikki began explaining the incident to Shizuku, in a voice that was necessarily lower than usual.

"Actually, Moroboshi-san once had to retire during his elementary school days."

That was in his sixth year. At that time, he had received national acclaim as the "Star of Naniwa"[9], but had been severely injured in an unfortunate train accident shortly before the grand finals of the U-12 tournament.

"His injuries were so severe that there were many complications even after the use of the iPS Capsule. The doctors said that he would probably never walk again."

As they could guard themselves with magic power, Blazers would be fine in the case of most accidents. But there were limits to what a Blazer's magic could take, and an incident on the scale of a derailed train was one of these.

"Of course, he couldn't take part in competitions in that state, so he was forced to forfeit the U-12 league, even retiring from the scene altogether."

"Such a thing happened? …Yet, he can walk and fight normally now, huh?"

"Yes. So it seems."

Indeed, even as he walked in front of them, there seemed—no, there was no uncertainty in the footfalls of the hero who had taken the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival the previous year.

"In other words, he is someone who managed to make a comeback after fighting through a rehabilitation process from disabilities that people said were impossible to overcome."

Yuudai Moroboshi had not walked a straight path unto glory. He had fallen into the depths once, but after four years of constant struggle, he had made it back to the stage of battle, and now stood at the summit. No, his road had not been smooth at all.

"Extraordinary. That isn't something a normal person could have done."

"…Indeed, that is so. To be able to make a comeback from those injuries…."

"Hmm, that's true, Shizuku, but I was talking about something more than just that."

"Eh?"

That he had made this comeback was impressive, but Ikki meant something more. Ikki gazing at the smiles on the people's faces as they spoke with Moroboshi.

"This scene in front of me is by far more impressive. No one here fears that he might be defeated. Not a single person asks after him, 'Is your body fine?' There is only one thing they have in him, and that is absolute trust."

They had not the slightest doubt in their minds that their Star of Naniwa had successfully made a full recovery. He had not only made an impossible turnaround from that state, but managed to create in its place unswerving faith.

"I think that is something even harder than simply reaching for the top."

If the opportunity came, Ikki thought enthusiastically, he would ask him. What made him go that far? What was the essence of that which drove him, that which motivated him? For whatever it was, it must have had everything to do with his strength.

Shizuku sighed deeply from beside him.

"…And so, this great person is going to be your first opponent. You really have no luck, Onii-sama—I wonder, what manner of crimes did you commit in your previous life?"

Arisuin smiled.

"Perhaps he spent all his luck on getting a good sister and a cute girlfriend."

"Well, if that's the case, I'm perfectly fine with having used my luck in that manner…—hmm?"

Cutting himself off, Ikki alone in their group stopped dead in his tracks. Amid the milling crowds, he had felt his spine tingle. As though someone was looking at him. Glaring at him. He turned. The feeling passed, the gaze broken, and dissipated with nary a whisper into the evening bustle.

"Onii-sama? Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing."

So saying, he quickened his footsteps, catching up with the other three. He had certainly sensed something, but it would be futile to pursue, and even more pointless to worry about it.

As he thought on that, the group exited the commercial strip.

"Over here, over here, everyone!"

They had reached their destination.

"This here is the best okonomiyaki place in Osaka, Ichiban Boshi[10]!"

Part 3

Going through the commercial strip in a straight line, the first thing one would see upon leaving it was the shop Moroboshi recommended. A red noren[11] reading "Ichiban Boshi" hung over the entrance of the two-story residential building, its dark wooden walls giving it a dignified feel. It had most probably been built before their time, even before their parents' time.

"This place's architecture has some amazing style."

"Nahaha. You mean it's fallin' apart, don't you? It's okay to say what you mean. But it can't be helped, since this store's been here since the Taisho era[12]—though apparently back then it was a sukiyaki place."

"I like the old look of the building, though. It's so nostalgic, isn't that great?"

"Wait, Alice, aren't you a foreigner?"

"I have Japanese blood… I think. Probably! …Oh my, what's that?"

Arisuin had fixed his eyes at a certain part of the building. Wondering what he had seen, Ikki followed his friend's gaze. A nameplate and a rusted postbox at the side of the entrance came into view, and on that nameplate were the words—Moroboshi.

"Eh, 'Moroboshi'? …Then, is this by any chance your place, Moroboshi-san?"

The expression on Moroboshi's face told them he was caught.

"Aaaah. Looks like I was found out. I was gonna keep it secret and then give you all a surprise after going in, but oh well. Aye, this is my place."

Arisuin's eyes widening in surprise.

"So that means you were just bringing customers to your own shop? You're pretty shrewd."

Moroboshi passed the veiled accusation over with a laugh.

"Nahaha. Well, of course. I am a merchant of Naniwa, after all."

Indeed, he was a strong example of the oft-spoken mercantile spirit.

"Don't worry, though, I meant it when I said that my place has the best okonomiyaki around! Ain't no way I'd let guests from so far away eat something that isn't tasty. You get to eat good okonomiyaki, our store earns some money—you're happy, we're happy. Ain't that great? Ain't that the best?"

Shizuki said with a questioning look.

"That ending was really shady, and everything fits together too unbelievably well. Is it really okay to trust this person? Wouldn't it be better to go find some other place right now?"

Ikki could understand her feelings.

"But we don't really know this city, so why not?"

"Well, if you're alright with it, Onii-sama, then I have no objections."

"Well then, let's go in. I can smell something delicious from out here, and it's making me hungry already!"

"So it's decided, eh?"

Having come to unanimous agreement, the four passed the threshold of the noren, and with a little difficulty pushed the old, rickety sliding door open.

"Oh-"

"Wow…."

Immediately, their noses were assaulted by the wafting aroma of

sauces, their appetites titillated by a fragrance many times stronger than what they had experienced outside.

"This smells great…."

Even Shizuku, who did not take a particular interest in food, could only say this.

"That's true. Also, this place seems quite popular."

Even though it was early for dinner, just as Arisuin had said, the turnout was impressive. Nearly every table was filled, and all around them calls and orders were being shouted. Leaving aside whether this was indeed Osaka's best, it was almost certain from the number of customers alone that the food could not possibly be bad.

"Heyyy, Moooom!"

Moroboshi yelled over the din just as their attention had been captured by the sights and smells of the restaurant. A middle-aged lady flipping a large number of okonomiyaki raised her head and turned, giving him a sharp look through widening eyes.

"Eh, why are you 'ere? Din'cha say you'd be at the hotel till the tourney was over?"

"I dropped by to see ma beloved mom's face."

"Bullshit! Don't kid around, you're givin' me goosebumps!"

"Did'ja have to say it like that? How am I supposed to be filial towards this kind o' mother?"

"I'm never gonna retire anyway, so I don't need no brat to wipe my ass!"

"Oi, this is a restaraunt. Don't be sayin' that kind of stuff!"

"Eh, shitty brats will be shitty brats, ain't it so, everyone?"

The customers laughed uproariously at their back-and-forth. Unadorned and unpretentious was the atmosphere of Osaka's downtown.

"Alright, what did'ja really come here for?"

Moroboshi jerked his thumb behind him to indicate Ikki and the others.

"I was bringin' some Tokyo-ites I met at the hotel around. Since they're out here, I was gonna let them eat the best okonomiyaki in Osaka!"

"Oh, so that's how it is."

It seemed that she had understood the gist of it, despite their conversation's brevity. Stopping what she was doing, her face still glistening with sweat, she gave them a warm smile.

"Welcome. I'm Yuudai's mother. Thank you for having come all this way."

"Ah, thank you, you're too kind."

"Now, I don't know if we's the best in Osaka, but I will give it m'all, so please wait expectantly."

"Right, we're looking forward to it."

"But it sure is crowded today. Are there any seats left?"

"There's just one. You can sit there. Koume~show these guests to their table."

Moroboshi's mother called from behind the kitchen. In response to that, a young girl dressed in Japanese-style clothing and an apron

approached Ikki and company. She looked a little young to be staff at a restaurant, and her bob-cut made her look like a middle-schooler.

"Ara, what a cute little one. Is she by any chance your sister?"

"Aye. That's my sister Koume. Unlike me, though, she isn't a Blazer."

She looked neither like her mother nor like Moroboshi—perhaps she had gotten her looks from her father.

"Koume, show the guests to the table in that corner."

Koume nodded, and moved ahead of them. Then her gaze met Ikki's, and her eyes widened, her expression changing to one of surprise and bewilderment.

Hmm?

Moroboshi was quick to follow up even as Ikki began falling to thought.

"Looks like she's surprised to see my opponent tomorrow come here."

"Ah, I see."

Her surprise passed in only an instant, as she schooled her expression back into a welcoming smile. Impressive, as expected of a merchant house's daughter. Koume bowed elegantly, and then from the depths of her kimono's sleeve she retrieved a sketchbook.

She then flipped to a page that read, in rather cute lettering, [Welcome~!], showing it to Ikki and the others.

"Eh…?"

The three of them could not help but express their surprise at this unexpected development. After all, there weren't many among service staff who would communicate through writing instead of speech. Again, seemingly anticipating this response, Moroboshi stepped in just in time.

"Don't worry about it, it's just that she can't speak."

Ikki nodded in understanding.

"Ah, so she writes instead…."

"That's right. But it's not a physical problem—apparently it's a psychological one."

Moroboshi said this brightly, as though to assure him that it was not a big issue.

「I'm more ladylike this way.」

Mischief was apparent in Koume's writing.

"Oh, that's rich, you unruly lass."

So saying, Moroboshi reached down to ruffle her hair, at which she only looked pleased. Ikki had been concerned at first to hear that she could not speak, but seeing them enjoy their exchanges he naturally began to smile.

"You two get along well."

"Well, she is my one and only cute little sister."

At that, Ikki suddenly felt a tap on his back. Turning, he saw Shizuku, who said only these inexplicable words.

"I'm also a 'one and only cute little sister'."

Um, what am I supposed to do now?

Neither comprehending her intent nor knowing what else to do, Ikki began to imitate Moroboshi.

"Uuu…"

His sister's response was a contradiction; she seemed to itch, yet seemed happy about the touch that caused it-was she trying to outdo the Moroboshi siblings? His sister's line of thought sure was hard to grasp.

"I wonder what's up, though."

Moroboshi mused as he looked at the state of the diner.

"It's pretty crowded in here, and we came early, too."

Koume scribbled rapidly on her sketchbook, explaining the situation in brief.

「These are all people who have come here in order to see the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. Most of them are fresh faces.」

Seeing this, Moroboshi came to a decision.

"Huh, so it is… hmm. Then it might be better if I joined. Sorry for only bringing you all here, but it looks pretty busy, so I gotta go help my mom out."

"You're not going to eat with us?"

"That was my intention, but there's quite a lot of people here, so…."

It was as he said—even though the restaurant was by no means small, there were almost no seats left unfilled. White smoke rose from

corner to corner in the kitchen, its iron griddles in full operation. Even a bystander could see that this was a busy time.

"Understood. We'll be fine, go help out your family."

Ikki was a little disappointed that he would not be able to speak to Moroboshi, but making him accompany them would also make him feel bad.

Moroboshi bowed.

"Sorry… and I brought you all here too. It's my treat today. If you want anything, just give Koume your order, and it'll be on me."

"Eh, weren't you trying to reel us in?"

Seeing Shizuku so surprised, Moroboshi gave a grin like that cat that got the cream.

"It was all a joke—we Kansai people don't mean what we say if we say it while smilin'."

So he had always intended to treat them to a meal—they'd been had by him up till now. Nonetheless—

"That's no good, we can pay for ourselves."

They had barely known him for a day, it would be mean to ask someone they had only just met to pay for the meal. Thus, Ikki meant to decline.

"It's fine. It's not that expensive 'nyways."

"But, still—"

"I said it's fine. I'm a third year, an upperclassman. Y'all should just listen to your elder, y'hear?"

…In the end, he made them accept. Yuudai Moroboshi was just that forceful a person.

"Well Koume, the rest is up to you."

Satisfied at his sister's nod that Ikki and company would be attended to, he tightened his bandana and headed for the kitchen. After seeing her brother off, Koume once again flipped the pages of her sketchbook.

「Allow me to show you to your seats～」

It seemed like a server's commonly used lines were already pre-written, they thought as they followed her to their seats.

「Please sit here～」

"Thank you."

Pleasantries exchanged, they sat down and began to order as they wished. These were all recorded down in Koume's sketchbook, and after a check to make sure she had them correct, were taken with her into the kitchen. All that was left to do after she left was to relax and wait for the menu to arrive.

But just then, they overheard this conversation going on from behind them.

"Whaaat. So Kiriko-san isn't going out with Moroboshi?"

"That's what I've been telling you, no? In the first place, he isn't even my type at all."

It was the voices of two women, and one of them was a voice Ikki had heard just the previous day. Exchanging a unspoken 'could it be?' with Shizuku and Arisuin, they turned around—

"Eh?"

"Ah!"

"My my."

—only to find that occupants of the other table had noticed their presence in turn. Looks were exchanged all around from five different people.

"Yakushi-san!"

And as he had anticipated, it was the 'White-Robed Knight' Kiriko Yakushi and Bukyoku Academy Newspaper Club's Yagokoro, whom they had met before at the training camp.

Part 4

It was an unexpected reunion in an unexpected place. If they had met at the hotel restaurant, such a meeting might have been passed over, but to meet a fellow Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative in the same eatery when the center of Osaka had them by the numbers was quite a remarkable coincidence—or so Ikki had thought, until further conversation proved otherwise.

"Eh, so you were the one who treated Moroboshi-san when he was seriously injured, Yakushi-san?"

"Yes. It's quite the coincidence, no?"

She was here more to meet Moroboshi than to have okonomiyaki, it seemed.

"Well, it is unexpected, but in the first place, you are the same age as him, right? Was it really okay to treat him without a medical license?"

"He's fine, so it's fine, right?"

Is that really the problem…?

Ikki definitely didn't think that was the issue at all, but prying seemed akin to kicking a hornet nest.

"So you've just come to check up on an old patient, Yakushi-san?"

Thus, he did not pursue, but rather asked after her reason for being here today.

"It's less of a check-up, and more of a house call."

"Eh—"

Hearing the words "house call", Ikki was seized by unease, and he asked in concern.

"Is Moroboshi-san not yet fully healed?"

Kiriko shook her head and assured him.

"Ah, he's fine. I patched him up properly. However, it was a little reckless, so this is my way of conducting individualized aftercare. After all, I shouldn't be taking any risks with my patients, should I?"

"Ah. So in other words, you're here out of your own goodwill."

"Yes, that's it."

"That's great to hear."

Ikki felt a weight lift off his chest at her dismissal of his fears.

It would be too much of a pity if he were to do battle with the Seven Stars Sword King, only for the latter to fall because of some past injuries.

"So I wanted to come over to the hotel room to conduct the aftercare,

but he wasn't in. I heard from Jougasaki that he'd gone back to his home, so I hailed a taxi and came here. It seems I got here early, too early in fact, which was my mistake—Ms. Paparazzi here got all suspicious as a result."

So saying, Kiriko shot a look Yagokoro's way.

"Haha, somehow, it feels like you had quite the disaster on your hands."

"Really."

"Aw, c'mon! You were hoverin' round his place like that although he was s'pposed to be all healed up already. It totally had th' look of a patient-doctor romance! Y'know, there was the smell of gossip all around it—like surströmming[13]! Y' couldn't have made me any more suspicious!"

"That's rich. Just look at the guy, he has eyes like a beast. Totally not my type. I prefer boys with sweet faces like Kurogane-kun over here."

"Whaaat—!?"

Ikki yelped, caught off guard by the outrageous comparison.

"Haha～♡."

Kiriko purred, as if sensing Ikki's inexperience in this regard.

"If you like, your big sister here can give you a pre-match checkup after this, with lots of… extra service. How about it?"

So saying, she gave him a heated look, while positioning herself such that he had an unobstructed view of her cleavage through the open top of her white doctor's gown. It had quite some impact—while she was no match for Stella in terms of proportions, she possessed the charm of a mature lady, and that aided her case greatly in her assault on Ikki's eyes.

Anyway, what on earth is a medical check-up with 'extra service'!?

In any case, he would likely come up positive for high blood pressure.

Shizuku as she moved from Arisuin's side to shield her beleaguered brother.

"I'm sorry, but as far as vulgar women go, Stella-san is enough."

"Couldn't you have put it a little better?"

Inwardly, Ikki heaved a sigh of relief knowing that Stella was not

here.

Yagokoro spoke up, addressing Arisuin.

"So, Moroboshi brought you guys here?"

"Well, that was sharp of you."

"I knew it."

Arisuin, having no reason to, had made no move to hide it. But from the certainty in her tone—

"Does he by any chance bring people here often?"

"Hmmm, well, I wouldn't say often, but he does sometimes bring strong people from other schools over when they come for friendly matches and the like. It's kinda his way of welcoming opponents from afar t' Osaka. I mean, that's half the reason I was here today—I thought I might hear something interestin'. But t'think he would bring his opponent for the first one 'ere. He's quite the idiot."

"Indeed, it really isn't normal."

"You're one to talk, you accepted his invitation."

"…Haha, I know I'm a little dense."

If he wasn't a little stupid, an F-rank like him would never have even thought about aiming for the Seven Stars Sword King.

So, he "welcomes opponents", huh?

"Haha… still."

Kiriko half-mumbled from behind Shizuku.

"he isn't quite as dense as you seem to think."

"What's that s'pposed to mean?"

"Just what it says on the tin. While he did invite Kurogane-kun and his friends here to welcome them, he has ulterior motives."

"Ulterior motives?"

Yagokoro's brow furrowed at the disquieting implications of that term. "You mean like using the fact that he treated them to this meal as leverage in tomorrow's battle? He's not the type to consider these petty tricks."

"Haha. That's so, that's certainly so. In fact, he's quite the opposite."

The opposite?

Whatever could 'the opposite' mean? But even as he pondered the meaning of those words—

"Whoa! You guys gave me a shock, what happened here?"

—Moroboshi cut off that train of thought inadvertently as he came in with their orders in hand.

Part 5

It was with some surprise that Moroboshi took in the crowd before him as he walked in, a plate of food in either hand.

"Koume said that the doctor was here. So you're here too, huh, Yagokoro."

"S'rather rude of you, to 'whoa!' a maiden to her face."

"It must be all sins you commit normally catching up to you, Ms. Paparazzi. Hope you weren't a nuisance to Kurogane, the doctor and

the others?"

"Of course not."

The sheer self-righteousness of Yagokoro's statement left Kiriko looking thunderstruck.

"Eh—"

Man, this is the one person I refuse to be called dense by.

After all, she herself could no longer be described as merely being "dense".

"You're one to talk about being a nuisance. It just goes against common sense to bring your next opponent to your place the day before your match."

"I didn't force them, so why not?"

"Well, I wouldn't know… you do look scary, so for all you know they might've been unable to refuse even though they wanted to."

Moroboshi laughed at her allegation.

"Don't be stupid. Someone who would be that scared of me wouldn't be here at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. Eh, Kurogane?"

"Well, I wouldn't say we were forced."

Hearing Ikki's reply, Moroboshi gave a pleased expression, as if to say "There, you see?" But his face clouded over swiftly.

"Still, I wish I could sit down and talk—so many interestin' people are here, after all."

He muttered ruefully as he laid out the dishes onto the two tables with a practiced hand.

"Gotta be truly down on my luck t' have work to do at a time like this."

Presently Ikki's order, a butatama okonomiyaki[14], had been placed in front of him. An impressively portioned meal, about the size of a small pizza.

"Right! Three butatama and two seafood deluxe, sorry for th' wait!"

"Wow. As expected, it smells great…and the bonito flakes are practically dancing on top, too."

Having been born overseas, Arisuin was excited to see real okonomiyaki for the first time. As for the rest, they too were spurred by the food's fragrance and the dancing bonito flakes to pick up their disposable chopsticks.

Ikki for his part was still concerned about the ulterior motives that Kiriko had mentioned earlier, but the atmosphere seemed wrong for that sort of conversation.

And I couldn't possibly ask Moroboshi-san himself if he has any such intentions, either.

Well, he would just decide what to do after eating first.

Having turned his thoughts thus, he picked up his own disposable chopsticks. Then, as he gazed upon his order, he noticed that something was different from the time they had eaten okonomiyaki in Tokyo.

"The tables at this restaurant don't have iron plates, huh."

"Well, if we did that the gas bill would be stupidly expensive, and 'nyways the okonomiyaki would be overcooked on one side. I mean, havin' 'em creates a better atmosphere, but we don't do it here. We serve the food at its best, and we'd like our customers to eat it that way."

As expected of the ones who prided themselves in being Osaka's best —they really had thought of everything. In that case, he decided as he began to cut his meal into appropriately-sized pieces, he would not waste this ideal state that his food was in.

"Right then, let's eat."

Paying this courtesy to Moroboshi, who was treating them, he brought the food to his mouth.

It had barely passed the threshold of his tongue when—

Ooohhh!

—his eyes widened, shining with praise. Indeed, this was an utterly different beast from the one they had in Tokyo. Its tastiness was on a whole other level. And surprisingly, this aroma did not come primarily from the sauce or the pork, but rather from the dough base. Also, the cabbage therein too was superb, having both a fresh sweetness and an rich aftertaste.

"Wow, this is delicious! Don't you think so, Shizuku?"

"…Yes. It's completely different from the food in Tokyo. There you could only taste the saltiness of the sauce, but here it's sweet. It feels like the sauce's saltiness brings out the sweetness of the base. It's a little too much food for me, however."

It seemed that Shizuku and Arisuin, too, rated the food favorably. Especially Shizuku; it was quite unlike her to be this eloquent. It was also uncommon for her to give such praise to food, being fairly well acquainted with the subtleties of gourmet food as she was. The other two also feasted upon their okonomiyaki with relish. Seeing this, Moroboshi looked truly pleased.

"Nahaha. It's good, innit? It's because there's a secret ingredient in our cooking. Did you catch it, Kurogane?"

"A secret ingredient, huh…."

Being asked that question, Ikki focused on the sensations of his tongue, thinking as he chewed. The main flavor of the okonomiyaki came from the fresh, strong sweetness of the cabbage, and a gentler sweetness in the dough base. The unique aspect of this dish was how this sweetness was then brought out and emphasized by the salty sauce. But that was not all; there was still that rich flavor, that which left a sweet aftertaste even long after he had chewed and swallowed. This could not be the cabbage's sweetness, not the sort that flowed down one's throat in an refreshing manner.

So, this secret ingredient is probably behind that rich flavor….

"…Hmmm, would it be cheese?"

After much tasting, he found the way sweetness stayed to be somewhat similar to cheesecake, and answered this way.

Moroboshi was impressed.

"Wow, you've got a good tongue. That's absolutely correct. Our okonomiyaki has cheese as a secret ingredient."

Just a little of course, as the taste of cheese was not primary in the dish. But, as Moroboshi had said, it had only taken that little amount of cheese to multiply the richness and flavor of the meal.

"That had to be it, or so I felt."

"I was somewhat troubled when I heard you were 'reeling us in', but with this I'm completely satisfied. Coming here with you was a great idea."

It was as Arisuin had said. Moroboshi hadn't been bluffing—the difference between this and the food from Tokyo was like the distance between heaven and earth. It was great that they had come here, Ikki thought. And because he thought this, he could not help but ask Moroboshi again.

"Um, Moroboshi-san, is it really okay for you to be treating us to such

delicious food?"

"It's fine, it's fine. If I took money from y'all after dragging y'all here, my mum would kill me. So don't sweat it, just take it as a welcoming a rival from far away."

"But I still feel bad about being treated…."

He had no basis of comparison on which he could call Ichiban Boshi's okonomiyaki the best in Osaka, but it was undoubtedly delicious. Ikki was grateful to him for having taken the time out, on the day before the day of their Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival match no less, to bring them here. That he had then paid for their feast only made him feel even more apologetic.

A smile crept across Moroboshi's face at Ikki's consideration.

"Well then, you can pay me back during our match."

"During the match?"

Faced with Ikki's confused query, Moroboshi nodded.

"Exactly. Good food is good motivation, y'know? So just take the day to rest up, and then meet me in the match tomorrow in your best condition, better than you've ever been. Provin' my strength by defeating an opponent at their strongest—now that's well worth the meal I treated!"

At that moment, Ikki realized something. If he looked closely, he could something lurking in Moroboshi's eyes under that friendly smile of his. Fighting spirit, almost bordering on killing intent, enough to make the hairs of his arm stand on end.

「He's quite the opposite.」

Just as he discovered that which Moroboshi had hidden, he understood the true meaning of Kiriko's words.

Indeed, Moroboshi did not seek petty gain in battle from treating the opponent kindly, but rather the opposite. Welcoming his opponent as best as he could and allowing them to re-energize themselves, so they could meet him in battle in peak condition. Victory that came of his opponent's poor form or carelessness meant nothing in his eyes. What he desired was a life and death battle with an opponent at their best. A victory in such a battle had meaning, value—this was the chivalry of the Seven Stars Sword King.

"In a battle at the highest stage, neither I nor my opponent should leave with any regrets. Therefore, tomorrow, let's battle to our heart's content with all our might. How 'bout it, Crownless Sword King?"

With all our might. With the words "all our might", the Seven Stars Sword King, he who stood at the top of the student knight of Japan, had acknowledged the F-rank knight Ikki as an opponent worth going

all-out against.

Ikki welcomed this. Like Moroboshi, he too believed there was nothing better than to match his opponent with everything he had. Being no more than an F-rank who just popped up out of nowhere, he had fully expected to be looked down upon. But the one who stood at the top was willing to come at him seriously.

It was great that I came here today.

Having understood Moroboshi's true intentions, Ikki felt so deeply. The strong foe before him had acknowledged him as a rival, as someone that demanded his full strength to deal with. As a knight, as a fighter, there was no higher honor. Therefore, there was no reason at all to reject this "ulterior motive".

"If it's like this, then I'd be glad to be treated to the meal. I will return that favor in full tomorrow."

"Lookin' forward to it!"

Part 6

Ikki and the others spent about an hour more at Ichiban Boshi before leaving. Moroboshi had expressed the desire for them to wait till he was free, but he never seemed to free up as the customers never dwindled but only increased in number. Their continued presence would only slow the turnover of customers—thus, regrettably, they had to depart.

"Haa. I haven't eaten this much in a long time. My stomach is so full."

"Yes, it's a little uncomfortable."

"Onii-sama and Alice even ate two pieces. That's just too much. You two aren't Stella-san."

"Well, I'm sure Stella-chan wouldn't just have eaten two…."

If Stella had heard that, a fight would have started.

Even though Stella had only really been training with the Yaksha Princess for slightly over a week, Ikki recalled quite a few arguments of that sort with fond nostalgia. If she was here, it would surely be more lively…. Having been together all the time in school, being parted made him miss her all the more.

When this Festival is over, we'll come to Moroboshi-san's place again.

Next time, they would bring Stella along. She would certainly enjoy it. So he vowed to himself, even as loneliness blew through him like a chill wind. Then he turned to Kiriko, who was walking beside him and asked in concern.

"Anyway, Yakushi-san?"

"What is it?"

"Is it okay to have not done your check-up on Moroboshi-san and left together with us instead?"

This had been bothering him for a while now. Though her original intent had been to run a check-up on Moroboshi, she had only ended up eating and then leaving together with Ikki and the others. Perhaps she might have forgotten?

Kiriko for her part seemed unperturbed, and replied straight up.

"Oh, but I've already done the checkup."

"Eh? When?"

"Haha. For a water element user of my level, it is possible to grasp a person's blood and lymph flows even through their clothing. If I wish it, I can read a person's intent via those flows, and even influence

them to take control of someone else's body."

"That's amazing…!"

Ikki thought aloud.

"So this was how you were able to seal Tatara-san's movements yesterday?"

"Indeed. It was originally supposed to be a rehabilitation assist, but this technique is also useful for punishing idiots… and anyway."

"Anyway?"

"Controlling people at will feels reeeally great."

She had a radiant smile, but her words were pure horror. Ikki vowed in his heart at that moment never to be treated by her.

"So, what are the results of your check-up, then?"

He was, after all, to be Moroboshi's opponent. That he was concerned was only natural.

Kiriko replied with a note of pride in her voice.

"Don't you worry, he's almost stupidly well, as would be expected of someone who was once treated by me."

"In other words, he's never been better?"

"Yes… you're going to have a hard time in the first round."

She sounded like she pitied him, but Ikki did not consider his situation pitiful. If anything, he was anxious that if Moroboshi were not at his best, there would be no worth in "returning the favor".

As they talked, they once again left the commercial strip, reaching

the train station.

"Well, looks like this is where I step off, I dun' stay at the hotel, after all."

"Do you need us to walk you back?"

Arisuin voiced concern that Yagokoro was returning home alone, but she declined.

"It's fine, it ain't that late. I'm a student knight too, y'know?"

With that, she stepped out of their circle, before stopping and turning around.

"Oh, that's right. I had something I wanted to ask you, Worst One."

"You look oddly serious. What is it?"

Yagokoro made a face torn between wry acknowledgement and embarrassment.

"Well, y'know, I would write any scoop s'long as it was interestin', but this rumor was just way too crazy, so I thought I gotta get it from the horse's mouth."

For even Yagokoro to call this rumor too crazy, it must surely be scarily so. Feeling a cold sweat break out, Ikki prompted her almost timidly.

"What… sort of rumors?"

"Aah, umm… they say you defeated Twin Wings in combat, is that true?"

Ikki's eyes did their best sunny-side-up egg impression.

She referred to his battle against the strongest swordsman in the

world, 'Twin Wings' Edelweiss, who he had fought on the deserted school grounds not long before. There had been no eyewitnesses, and as such no news made of it. As such, he had not imagined that anyone else would have known about this. Seeing his reaction, Yagokoro pressed forward first.

"Eh! What's with dat reaction!? Is it real then? Did you really win!?"

"No, wait, wait-wait-wait! Calm down a bit, please! Yes, it's true that I did cross swords with Edelweiss, but—"

"S-So you did!"

"That's why I said, calm down—!"

Grabbing Yagokoro by the shoulders, he somehow managed to calm her down from her almost predatory state, before proceeding to refute that rumor.

"I won't deny that I did indeed fight her—the rumor is correct, but only up till there. I did not win. I lost consciousness during the battle, and the next thing I knew I was lying was a hospital bed. In other words, I'm only alive because she held back on me."

He could not bear to think of what would happen if this misunderstanding got out.

"I-I see, so as I expected, it was false, huh…."

Yagokoro also seemed to accept quickly that the rumor was merely that.

"Yeah, that was probably it. Still, that you fought her and survived in itself is big news, ain't it? I know you gotta leave now, and I'm sorry, but could'ja tell me some details about the fight?"

Her face positively beamed at having unearthed this unexpected big scoop.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

"Wh-Why!? I'm not gonna mock you for losin', y'know?"

"No, I'm not refusing for that reason. Simply put, I don't remember."

"You don't… remember?"

"Yes… I remember being beaten really badly, and at some point I lost myself—the last moments were especially muddy."

This was the truth. All he remembered was his last-ditch Dokuga no Tachi being repelled with ease, and *Intetsu* shattering to pieces. Following this, he had no memory of how he had attempt to fend off Twin Wings. Thus he could not recall it—the moment when his sword had landed a hit on the world's strongest swordsman. Though he had heard of it from Kurono after she rescued them, it all felt too surreal, as though it had happened to someone else.

"So, well, you see, all I can tell you is that I lost."

"So that's how it is…."

Kurogane Ikki was not one to lie, this much Yagokoro knew even from their short acquaintance. Thus, she shrugged. It was disappointing, but she would not pursue the matter further.

"As I feared, though, this information alone won't make for a juicy enough scoop… say, do you mind if I fill in some… details?"

"I would."

"Come on, you'll lose magnificently!"

"No."

"Ooh. You're so stingy."

With this came her best glare, but Ikki refused to give any ground. If he left her to dramatize the story as she liked, who knew what would come of it. Before long, Yagokoro backed down first in the face of his firm stance.

"Well there's nothing for it, then. I'll just have t'give up on making this into an article."

"I'd be thankful if you did that."

"…But, to be honest, my estimation of you has gone up after hearing about this, Worst One. Now I'm really lookin' forward to see the match between you n' Moroboshi. Then, that's all, eh? Bye!"

Sending Ikki her support thusly, Yagokoro headed off by herself in the direction of the bus stop. Shizuku spoke up first after the seeing-off.

"Let's go back together, shall we? We do stay at the same hotel, after all."

Ikki, however, declining that suggestion.

"I'll pass. I'll walk back instead of taking the train."

"Why would you do that? It's still quite the distance, you know."

"It's, well, I guess two pieces really was too much for me. I'd like to do a bit of light exercise to help with the digestion."

And on top of that—

"I guess Moroboshi-san's fighting spirit has infected me too. I can't seem to sit still, so I guess I need to walk it off."

There was also that reason. In any case, Shizuku understood that while the hotel was a ten-minute train ride away, that distance was nothing her brother couldn't handle, and so she accepted it with only

one mild reminder.

"So that's how it is. I understand—but tomorrow's match is an important one, so please be careful not to overtax yourself."

"I will keep myself in check, of course."

"Do you want me to come with you, Ikki?"

"…Nah, it's fine, Alice, you can just go with Shizuku."

"Ah, alright then, I understand."

"Then, I'll see you all tomorrow at the match."

Ikki waved, before heading off through the alleys in a different direction from Yagokoro.

"Onii-sama is really happy."

Shizuku could not help but notice this, and she said so in a pleased voice.

"Yes, it seems that he was really struck by the Seven Stars Sword King's fighting spirit. It was to be expected, I suppose, seeing as that fighting him in optimal condition was in fact his ulterior motive."

"Onii-sama was also unusually provocative in his reply."

"He probably couldn't contain his excitement. As an F-rank, he has been ridiculed, unacknowledged, and yet he continues to believe in his own potential. Having the chance to test himself against the Seven Stars Sword King alone would have been enough motivation for a battle maniac like him. And now he knows that his opponent, too, desires that battle. He must be so happy and proud he can barely sit still… that's actually really cute."

No doubt Ikki looked forward to meeting Moroboshi in battle

tomorrow when both of them were at their best in both body and mind. To Shizuku and Arisuin, this was what they could see in Ikki's bright expression.

"But, this much won't be enough to win."

Kiriko spoke suddenly, causing them to gape slightly.

"Eh?"

"Won't be enough to win… do you mean Onii-sama?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"Wh-Why would you say that?"

Shizuku seemed chagrined that the White-Robed Knight would suddenly claim that her brother would lose.

"I would say that it's an issue of mentality."

Kiriko narrowed her eyes.

"I think that Kurogane-kun is a splendid knight. While being an F-rank, he aimed for and made it to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival —so he certainly has both the drive and the strength. Even when facing the Seven Stars Sword King, he did not show any sign of fear, but rather challenged him head on—that he has ambition thus also plain to see… but I feel that he is taking it this lightly."

"Lightly… you say?"

Shizuku stared daggers at Kiriko, perceiving this as an insult to her brother. Arisuin moved to calm her down, even as he spoke what was on both their minds.

"You said Ikki is taking this too lightly. How different is Moroboshi from him then, if they share the same feelings on the matter?"

If they had different feelings on the matter, why would Moroboshi have said something like "I wish to fight you when you're at your best"?

But Kiriko simply shook her head lightly at his words.

"…That's not true. I think you've misunderstood the man called Yuudai Moroboshi quite severely. Beneath what I called his ulterior motives is something very different from Kurogane-kun's ambition. Halfhearted feelings that those would never have allowed him to overcome those injuries. That which supports him is something else altogether. It's something even more unique than the mere desire to fight those above you, or to chase after a beautiful victory. It is a most grievous sense of duty. If Kurogane-kun only holds on to such self-congratulatory ideas like wanting to fight a battle he can be proud of, or aiming for greater heights—he cannot defeat Moroboshi. I'm sure of it."

Part 7

Ikki did not take the path back to the hotel after having parted from Shizuku and the others. Instead, he headed for a park away from the busy streets, away from the bustle of the night. None of that could be heard here, only the insects.

"Would you like to come out now? No one will hear us here even if we cause a disturbance."

The one he addressed was the source of that murderous intent that he had felt in front of Ichiban Boshi. That same gaze had continued to follow him since earlier. This was the real reason Ikki had chosen to return to the hotel alone—to speak to the owner of that gaze. Even with the Seven Stars Sword King among them, this person had unswervingly fixed an bloodlust upon Ikki alone, without anyone noticing. This alone spoke volumes of this pursuer's skill.

A moment later, his estimations were proven correct, as a figure

emerged from the shadows and stood in front of him. Ikki gasped.

"To think that it would be you…."

The newcomer's Japanese-style clothing fluttered in the night wind. His sleek-lidded eyes flashed like naked blades. Yet, he and Ikki would have been spitting images of one another, if not for the cross-shaped scar that marred his face.

"…Ouma."

Indeed, this was none other than Ikki's brother by blood, and the sole

A-Ranked Knight among Japan's student knights: Ouma Kurogane, the Sword Emperor of Wind.

Having shown himself, Ouma said not a word as he cast a piercing stare in Ikki's direction. It was hardly an amicable look, but rather one filled with killing intent, or perhaps enmity. Whichever it was, his mere gaze was enough to exert a prodigious pressure. The two of them were around the same height. Yet face-to-face, Ouma seemed to loom two, even three times his size—such was the substance of his mere presence.

Steeling himself, Ikki managed to not be swallowed up by the pressure his brother's gaze exuded.

"So, what might you need? Judging by that time in Hagun Academy, I don't suppose you're here for some brotherly bonding, are you?"

In dealing with Ouma, it was best to begin by asking for the agenda, for he was not someone to do anything—much less appear in front of him—without one.

Ouma spoke, breaking his silence.

"Of course, I came here to meet the likes of you only for one purpose. I have something that I must say."

"Something you must say?"

Ouma nodded slightly, then with a voice that echoed not in his ears, but in his very guts—

"Withdraw from the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival at once, Ikki."

His tone and words brooked no disagreement. Ikki gaped at the sudden command. Why did he have to withdraw from the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival?

"May I hear a reason?"

"Did you not understand what you were told? How carefree."

Ouma's brows furrowed, his annoyance at his brother's words plain.

"Your existence is a stumbling block to the Crimson Princess."

"…What?"

Having heard his brother's mind, it was Ikki's turn to frown.

"Since when have I been a stumbling block to Stella? I'd like it if you didn't reproach me without any basis."

"It's the truth. Thanks to your deceptions, you worm, the Crimson Princess has been foolishly wasting her time these few months competing at your level after being bested by you."

"Deception?"

"Techniques, tactics, all the means with which you attempt to catch the opponent off guard, those petty tricks with which you have bluffed and scraped your way to victory—that is your deception. Strength is not something that is found from such vulgarity, and she can never hope to become strong or anything like that by following the back of such a vulgar man. To tell the truth, she disappointed me during our battle when we assaulted Hagun. Someone of the same caliber as I should not have only amounted to that."

All this feigning the appearance of strength and thus conning Stella—he laid at Ikki's feet. Having so decided, Ouma rounded on him.

"Therefore disappear, fool. The Crimson Princess is too good for someone like you."

"I see, so that's how it is."

Ikki gave a light sigh at Ouma's words. Having heard up till here, he could understand why his brother had claimed that he was blocking

Stella's progress. Simply put, Ouma was judging him on the basis of his own value system.

To him, strength was not the technique one used to win, but the power one has. That the person with more power would win was a given—techniques capable of subverting this law were nothing but trickery.

Really, what harsh words.

It really was harsh. After all, Ouma's ideals were nothing but a complete rejection of his existence as a F-rank knight aiming for the top. It was quite like Ouma as a purist of strength to speak this way, but Ikki was not about to by any means accept this ideal.

"I finally understand why you think that I have become an obstacle to Stella's progress, big brother. However, I have no reason to go along with your values. Even if is as you say, that your values are the truth, that I am a fake… Stella loves me, and she desires to have one more battle with me. To me, that is all. Everything. Your words do not hold a candle to our promise, Ouma. They do not move me."

He rejected Ouma's request unceremoniously. His brother in response did not look too disappointed, and indeed seemed to have anticipated this refusal to submit.

"You're a fool. Do not misunderstand me. I am not asking—I am ordering you. If you won't listen, then I will simply use force to bring you to heel. That's all there is to it."

With a single slow motion—as though finding the task too tiresome—he materialized his own Device, the nodachi *Ryuuzume*, longer than the average Japanese sword by a shade. The air itself around them seemed to freeze over with tension, as frightful birds fled their trees overhead. They knew—they knew that the moment this sword was drawn, all within the park lay inside the palm of Ouma's hand.

Ikki, too, knew this. But even though he did he did not waver in the least. A smile unafraid crept upon his lips.

"Well, this is good—I don't hate that it's easier to understand this way."

As he said this, he materialized his own Device, *Intetsu*.

He was already resolved. From the time that Ouma had shown himself, he had known that there was no way their exchange could end peaceably. Those words had then sealed that fate. Ouma had said that the time Ikki and Stella had spent together up till now had been worthless. To Ikki, meeting her, the days they had spent together—these things were precious. He could not simply smile and let such words pass. For the sake of Stella, who loved him, he would not rest till he made Ouma pay for saying them.

"Whether I am merely a stumbling stone for Stella or not—come ascertain it with your blade!"

"Don't you dare snarl at me in my own words, ragged mongrel!"

Thus did the extra-tournament battle between the Kurogane brothers erupt.

Part 8

Within the city, the battle between the the Sword Emperor of Wind and the Worst One began suddenly.

It was Ouma who made the first move. He lifted his hand, Ryuuzume glowing with pale, baleful fire in the darkness—

"Ha!"

—and swept horizontally at a rapidly closing Ikki. Ten meters separated the two. It was a distance no blade's reach could cross, or would cross. And yet—

"Tch!"

Ikki's body, already held close to the ground in his charge, now went lower still as he dived flush to the ground in a panic. Not a moment too soon—a frigid gale passed over him, scything through the rows of trees behind him in its wake.

A blade of steel might not cross that distance. But a blade of wind was a different matter. This was the Noble Art *Shinkuuha*[15], a popular offensive technique among wind users that tore through air, creating a small corridor of vacuum. Naturally, Ouma was capable of using it.

"Haa!"

Ouma struck out with *Ryuuzume* once again, sending another blade of vacuum hurtling toward Ikki. A slash capable of cutting through air. While it lacked the sheer offensive strength of a fire-user's ranged abilities like Stella Vermillion's own long-range technique Dragon Fang, its supersonic speeds and the difficulty of dodging an invisible strike made it a deadly ability in its own right.

But such a pedestrian technique would not be able to tame the Worst One. Ikki continued to advance without losing an iota of speed, juking his way through the gaps between the vacuum blades, dodging them all by a hair's breadth. From his movements it was obvious that he had seen through the supposedly invisible Shinkuuha. But how? The trick lay in that which Ikki had fixed his gaze on. His eyes were not on the unseen blades, but the *Ryuuzume* Ouma wielded. Though it boasted supersonic speed, Shinkuuha could only go a straight line down the trajectory drawn by its user's Device. Therefore, following it and evading it was simple if one observed *Ryuuzume*'s angles of attack. It was much like dodging bullets, where one could easily evade them by reading the timing of the bolt's movements, and the position of the muzzle. For someone with Ikki's reflexes and motion perception, they simply could not hit.

"Hmph…."

Weaving past the corridor of vacuum slashes, Ikki was closing in. As

though judging that bringing Ikki down was beyond mere Shinkuuha, Ouma too charged and swung at Ikki's neck—not with a sword of wind this time, but with a sword of steel.

"Kaaaa!!"

"Tch…!"

He's fast!

Despite wielding a bladed weapon whose weight equaled that of a spear, the sharpness and speed of Ouma's slash with his nodachi by far surpassed Ikki's.

This was not a difference in skill—indeed, both sides were about equal in that regard. The difference lay in Ouma's ability. Manipulating the wind, he had rendered air resistance null and void, giving his white blade the advantage in speed over Ikki's black one. Without Ittou Shura, there was no counter to such speed. Having judged in that moment, Ikki took up a defensive stance—

Swish

—and then he felt a chill freeze the blood in his veins as that sound reached his ears.

"Oooooh!"

Forsaking defense, he threw himself backward to avoid Ouma's strike. The blade struck the sandy soil of the park—and did not stop there, carving a seemingly bottomless chasm in the earth below, etching that fissure-like wound deeply into the ochre-colored ground. Ikki broke into a cold sweat at the sight. Stella too could shake the ground with her strikes, but Ouma's were a cut above her's. After all, shaking was a phenomenon caused by the dispersion of energy—a sign of excessive waste and imperfection in the user's magic control. A true strike of concentrated energy created no such perturbations. Where it went, it silently yet thoroughly blew everything away. That was Ouma's strike, which had cut through the earth like a knife through

hot butter.

How much energy would have had he gathered, how much force and mass simulated in order to do something like that? How many hundreds of kilograms? How many thousands? He did not know, but one thing he did. His brother's strike, much like Stella's, was a brutal blow. And not one he could take head-on.

But—

This extraordinary offensive strength, it can only be created by that body.

"You've changed a lot since we last met all those years ago, Ouma. No, I should say you've changed too much. What's the secret behind that body?"

"Oh?"

Ouma cracked a predatory grin at Ikki's words.

"To think that you would notice my anomaly in our first crossing of blades. Though it is trickery, your wounding of Twin Wings is evidently not just for show… however, there is nothing you can do with that knowledge. This anomaly is pure strength alone, unlike your deceptions."

Indeed, that slash was a tough customer. He was by no means a stranger to attacks that he could not defend against. He had once fended a similarly earth-shattering blow from Stella by negating her demon-like physical strength with a soft defense. But that had only been possible because of Stella's inexperience. A blade wildly swung cuts not the falling leaf. That was the principle behind it; deflecting wild strength was but a simple matter.

Ouma's blade-work was different. Its path betrayed not the slightest hesitation or deviation—it would surely slice even a falling leaf clean in twain.

Like this, even using Ten'i Muhou would be fairly dangerous.

How would he deal with this demon's blade? Using Ittou Shura would allow him to close the speed gap, but given the one-minute time limit it had it was still too soon to use it. He needed to force Ouma's to show more of his hand first.

In that case, what indeed would he have to do? As he drew on his past experience to come to a solution—

"I see you're thinking of some pointless things."

Ouma's mocking call from a distance snapped his train of thought.

"I've said it before. There is nothing you can do."

Then, Ouma made his move. Was it Shinkuuha once again? No. He did not make to slash, but instead raised his blade on high, as though meaning to pierce the moon.

"Also, I don't intend to waste much time on someone of your level. Let's just put a time limit on this—all this scurrying about is depressing."

He then began his incantation.

"Bind and shut—*Mukou Kekkai*[16]."

The pale emerald fire shrouding Ryuuzume burst forth in vibrant flame, and in an instant a savage gale swept across the battlefield. The sands rose and churned, blinding the eyes as the howling winds drew them into its twisting updraft. Ikki clawed at the ground with both hands, barely managing to keep himself from being thrown up into the air as well.

Kuh! He's obstructing my vision…!

The sandstorm and the twister as one had stripped him of both sight and mobility. He could not but acknowledge that this move was effective, but he quickly realized painfully that even that line of

thinking was naive. A man who pursued strength as purely as Ouma did would never use a technique that was simply meant to reduce his opponent's fighting capability.

Mukou Kekkai had a more terrifying, more direct ability, and that was—

"This…!"

I can't… breathe!

—the forced removal of oxygen. The updraft Ouma had created was robbing the battlefield of it, drawing it up high into the sky, denying Ikki the luxury of time.

"You have ten minutes. About one if you fight; that's all you have left. I have no patience for you to be conserving that miserable strength of yours. Come at me with all you have."

Ikki, hearing Ouma's commanding tone, steeled himself. Indeed, he had no time to conserve his power, exactly as his brother had said. Moreover—

This isn't an opponent I can hold back against.

He did not know what had happened to his brother during the time when Ouma whereabouts had been unknown, but it was clear that he was many times stronger than Ikki had remembered him. This compounded with his preexisting power deficiency meant that Ouma was not an opponent against which he could hope to hide an ace. Recognizing this, Ikki aborted his attempt to see through Ouma's strength, and ignited all the magic flowing through his body.

"Ittou Shura."

A burst of azure fire wrapped around his body as his sword spirit burst forth, like a rushing wind yet sharp enough to cut flesh. The trees in the park again shook, their leaves falling like raindrops. Having experienced many battles, Ikki's spirit had come to possess a

very physical pressure.

Yet Ouma was not in the least shaken by that level of pressure. Rather than be in the least intimidated by Ittou Shura, he seemed to be annoyed—as one presented with something dull.

"A highly focused release of all one's power within a short period of time used in order to defeat with explosive force an opponent whose total reserves you cannot match… this is the height of deception. Just looking at it makes my skin crawl…. Come. Allow me to blow this stumbling stone away."

With almost leisurely movements, he settled into a battle stance. Stoic and unmoving, he evoked the image of a mighty mountain. Deep-rooted in the earth, an absolute presence. Ikki was almost overwhelmed by this feeling alone. But he had already played his trump card. He had a minute left, no more. Even a second's waste was fatal against this foe. Therefore—

"Haaaaaa!"

The knight in black initiated the decisive attack, his posture low to the ground like a shadow. In response, the Sword Emperor of Wind too made his move, his blade sweeping forth like a hurricane towards that shadow's head.

But when cloaked in Ittou Shura, Ikki was swifter than any wind!

I can do this!

He intended to end this in the first strike using the decisive difference in speed. Deflect Ouma's blow, avoid him, and strike at his body in a flash.

Don't be afraid.

His eyes fixed on the white blade bearing down on his head. Ouma could split the earth with this blow. If he allowed fear to cripple his deflection, he would be decapitated in a single strike.

Focus!

He sought maximum concentration to avoid this executioner's guillotine. The precision to deflect this falling blade. He could do it. He had to be able to. With all that he had honed himself with so far, he could surely do it. So, without fear—

Gooooo!

Encouraging himself thus, Ikki summoned up his utmost focus and charged at the oncoming blade. In that instant, all too suddenly—

…Eh?

—he stopped.

Part 9

What… is this!?

Ikki's eyes widened in shock at the sudden anomaly in his body that occurred as he and Ouma were about to cross swords. This was the precise moment that he had concentrated all his energies unto. The moment when he should have parried Ouma's attack, and then gotten within his guard. Yet at this decisive moment—it was as though the connection between his mind and body was suddenly severed. He was conscious. Yet his body would not move.

What… is happening!?

He had no time to be surprised, however. He was the only one who had stopped. Ouma's blade was upon him in a flash.

Shit!

He barely managed to get his guard up before it made contact with

his neck.

But he had taken Ouma's earth-splitting physical strength head-on.

"Gaaaah!"

Ikki was blown dozens of meters of away as though hit by a heavy truck, smashing against a stone wall.

"Gah-hak!"

A gout of bloody mist came forth from his mouth—the impact had reached his internal organs, wounding them. The bones in his arms were broken up to the elbows from taking that slash squarely. But, at this moment, both those things were irrelevant to Ikki.

What was that, a moment ago…!

At the moment of the decisive clash, he had frozen up mysteriously. Why had he stopped? Ever since he had taken up the sword, this had never happened before. But even as Ikki was driven to distraction by this mysterious occurrence within his body—

"Hmph."

Ouma spoke, his voice rankling with impatience.

"what are you so surprised about? Surely you do not think that you could continue as-is after having fought the world's strongest swordsman? Even if your body is fine, she left her mark on your spirit."

"…Eh!?"

"To think you couldn't even accept her gift, and yet dared to bark at me. You who know not your place—"

Even as Ouma reviled him thus, he gradually settled into an offensive

stance. He lifted his hand, blade held parallel to the ground. In an instant, *Ryuuzume* burst forth in a nimbus of as-yet unmatched light as its blade was clad in wind. The result was one of extraordinary scale as the revolving winds devoured the atmosphere around them, threatening to suck all the surrounding objects into its grasp. Layer upon layer of cutting gale coalesced, forming this single blade of air. A blade of a whirlwind, capable of slicing all in its path.

Yes, this was the Noble Art that had felled both the Crimson Princess and Raikiri.

"For a con-artist like you, Kusanagi is overkill. However, it would be just as distasteful were I to fail to slay you by not completing the task. Therefore, take this special favor gratefully—and die."

Having delivered his parting shot, Ouma swung, sending his greatest technique at the severely wounded Worst One.

I can't take this technique on…!

He had to avoid it, by any means necessary. He was concerned of course, by the meaning behind the 'gift' of Edelweiss' that Ouma had spoken of. Still, he chased it from his mind for now, ordering his body—still wracked with damage done by the impact—to flee the oncoming threat with all its might.

But he froze up again—just like before. His brain desperately appealed to his body to flee, but his flesh was frozen, unresponsive. Were his bodily functions disabled by the damage? That possibility arose first in his mind. But checking his wounds, he dismissed it—they was severe, yes, but not the point where he would be immobile.

Then, why? He couldn't understand. He couldn't understand. But at this rate he would take the blow squarely.

Kuh!

He had to think of something. But nothing came to his mind, the only part of his body that had not yet stopped, even as its gears churned at

full speed. He was about to be swallowed whole by the titanic force of that wind blade—

"Tear 'em to shreds, *Tora-Ou*!"

Part 10

A young man wielding a yellow spear interposed himself between the Worst One and the blade of compressed wind that threatened to slice him to smithereens just as it would anything else. Well-built and with eyes like a predator's, it was the Seven Stars Sword King, Yuudai Moroboshi.

"Tear 'em to shreds, *Tora-Ou*!"

With a cry that pierced the skies, he thrust the golden spear at the descending tornado. Golden light shot forth from the point of the spear, the radiance swiftly taking the shape of a tiger's head—jaws open and fangs bared. The golden tiger created of magic power seized the oncoming wind blade in its wide open maw, bit down—and Ouma's trump card, the Kusanagi that had so easily taken down the Crimson Princess and the Raikiri—first rate student knights in their own right—was literally torn to pieces. Split asunder down the middle by the tiger, the blade of wind dispersed and ultimately dissipated into nothingness.

"You 'kay, Kurogane?"

Moroboshi asked as he stood between the brothers as Ikki's shield.

"Mo, Moroboshi-san, why are you h—?"

"You forgot somethin', so I came to give it back to ya."

So saying, he tossed an object towards Ikki's chest—his student datapad.

"The doc said you were headin' back on yer own. I was just takin' it easy, following the road back to the hotel… and then somehow just stumbled on some outrageous sibling argument."

Moroboshi then turned from Ikki to Ouma.

"Yo, long time no see, Ouma. Haven't seen your face around since the we were in elementary school."

"Moroboshi, the Star of Naniwa… or should I say, the Seven Stars Sword King?"

"Ha. I don't wanna be called no Seven Stars Sword King by you. You weren't even at that year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival."

Moroboshi spoke, referencing their old rivalry in elementary school.

"Winning that title don't mean a thing to me… well, let's leave that one aside for now."

As they exchanged words, Moroboshi scanned the surrounding area and frowned at the sorry state it was in. The deep crevasses carved into the ground. The trees felled by the whirlwind. The broken stone wall.

"Ain't this a little overboard for a sibling argument? Someone might've died if I din' step in!"

"That would be the Noble Art that can negate all other Noble Arts—*Tiger Bite*[17]. You managed to shatter Kusanagi and even Mukou Kekkai."

"Aye, dat's how it is. In other words, your power over wind ain't got nothin' on me. Now that you know that, lemme ask you… you gonna continue this silly fight? You keep makin' a ruckus in my home turf, you'll be up against me."

Threatening Ouma in a voice sharp as a dagger, Moroboshi thrust his

spear, infused with the power of the Noble Arts-negating Tiger Bite, at him.

"No. I no longer desire to continue."

Closing his eyes, he recalled *Ryuuzume*. Moroboshi's Tiger Bite had been able to destroy his trump card Kusanagi with ease. Did he find his odds against Moroboshi's assistance too unfavorable? No. To know when to back off was never his strong suit. His reason for continuing the battle was just gone. What little interest he had possessed before left his cold eyes as he fixed them upon Ikki, who was still collapsed behind Moroboshi.

"If he cannot not accept the gift of Twin Wings, then there is no need for me to finish him off here—he will be defeated by you tomorrow. All the better. The Crimson Princess will surely wake up if she sees his pathetic form."

Throwing this last barb, he turned on his heel and melted into the darkness from which he had come. As he left, he muttered a last few words.

"Still, to have forgotten something, huh? …What a lucky man."

Moroboshi gave an exasperated sigh as he watched Ouma leave.

"Well, his appearance has changed quite a bit since elementary school, but ain't his cold attitude still the same?"

Once Ouma had completed disappeared, he then turned back to Ikki, who was now slumped against the stone wall.

"Well, what was that about? Heard y'all mention Stella-chan or somesuch. This some kind of lover's quarrel? You two brothers fighting over the same girl, like in the drama serials?"

Ikki smiled bitterly at Moroboshi's flippancy as he stood up haltingly.

"Please stop, I nearly died back there. Still, you really saved me. Thank you very much for that… and for the datapad as well."

"All good, all good. Don't sweat it… more importantly."

His eyes narrowed, and he continued in a more serious tone. He was only concerned about one thing.

"Well, what's the matter with you, Kurogane? I only looked from afar, but your movements were weird. Didn't look like it was due to your injuries either…."

He had seen Ikki when he had seemed to not flee from Kusanagi. Unfortunately, the answer to his question was something Ikki himself wanted to know, more so than anyone else.

"Honestly, I don't know what happened or how…."

It had come completely unannounced—he should have conditioned himself perfectly in preparation for the tournament. So he could nothing but shake his head.

"Is that so… but really, you looked exactly like a deer in the headlights of a really big speeding truck. Well, that can't be it, can it?"

After all, no knight who could appear at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival would be scared out of their wits by an opponent's technique, much less someone like Ikki, the 'Worst One' who had been brave enough to smile even when matched up against the Crimson Princess and her Katharterio Salamandra. That could not be so. Yet—

Moroboshi's casual words caused something to flash across Ikki's mind.

「Surely you do not think that you could continue as-is after having fought the world's strongest swordsman? Even if your body is fine, she left her mark on your spirit.」

These were the words that Ouma had said to him at the end of their battle. Now that he thought about it, it was indeed exactly as his brother had described it. He had fought against the world's greatest swordswoman, and lived. Been defeated by her, yet was whole. Could it have possibly been this convenient? He had come back from having one foot in the grave—but it seemed like not a thing had changed… was this line of thought perhaps a little too naive?

An ill premonition sent him into a cold sweat. This happened often in the world of fighting, with a good example being boxing. After having suffered a severe loss, some fighters would develop an extreme irrational fear of an opponent's punches and as a result freeze up in panic during the few seconds where blows were exchanged. This trauma-induced mental condition was known as "Punch Eye". Naturally, those afflicted by this condition could not continue fighting.

Some would call them broken. Could it be…that without knowing it, he had been broken? Indeed, he had checked out on the tests done after the battle with Edelweiss. He could still perform up to his usual standards in training. But none of these situations had put his life in any danger. Thus, he had not realized it till now, only to have it come out into the open when faced with the genuine killing intent that Ouma had exuded. It was a frightening thought, and unfortunately, it was not all baseless talk. Rather, it was just as Ouma had said—for him to have come out unscathed from a battle with the strongest swordswoman was unnatural. Should not it have been expected that some part of him, whether body or spirit, had been shattered during the fight?

Seeing the blood drain from Ikki's face, Moroboshi spoke up, concerned.

"What's up? You've got a scary face on… did you think of something?"

"…No… not particularly…."

He did not tell Moroboshi what his thoughts were. He could not

possibly do so. He could not show his next opponent his weakness. And more importantly—

「I look forward to fighting you when you're at your best.」

—Moroboshi had looked forward to their battle so much. He would not tell him, even were his lips ripped open. Ikki forcibly quashed the uneasiness within him.

All the while, Moroboshi continued to eye him, until—

"That so? …Well, leaving that aside, let's get you to a doctor real quick, eh? Just sit down for a bit."

Dropping his pursuit of that point, he whipped out his own datapad and began dialing for an ambulance.

"Sorry about this…."

Was this really thanks, or was it an apology? Muttering these words whose true meaning even he knew not, Ikki placed his shattered hands over his chest. Ittou Shura had long since been dispelled, and the fatigue had by now risen to claim his entire body. Thanks to that, his entire body had been numbed and therefore he did not feel the pain of his wounds.

What's happened… to me? To my body…?

And yet the fear that arose in his heart of having broken somewhere as a knight did not decrease in the slightest.

Later, after having received treatment and returned to his hotel room, Ikki continued his self-examination. Diving deep within his consciousness, he examined both his body and his soul, leaving no stone unturned. But he could not find any apparent trace of affliction. Rather, he could not but conclude that he was in optimal condition. Was he really broken? If not, that freeze-up, what was it?

He did not know, and because he did not know, he could not even begin to overcome it. That boded ill. To challenge the Seven Stars Sword King while sitting on this ticking time bomb he did not even understand was reckless. This was not an opponent he could beat if his body were to refuse to move at critical junctures. He had to conquer it somehow.

But as though mocking the anxious worrying in his heart, it came.

Light. The morning. The day where it would all begin….

Part 11

「It is said,
Conflict is evil, for from it is born hatred;
Peace is good, for from it is born kindness;
Violence is a sin, for by it we harm our fellow man;
Conciliation is a virtue, for by we care for them;

「If mankind were sensible, we would surely think this way.

「But, despite this, humankind nonetheless yearns for strength!
To be stronger than all others! To be bolder than all others!
Overwhelming power, before which none can stand! Absolute power, with which you shall do as you please!

「Let them speak, who have never longed for this. Let them open their mouths, who have never desired it.
All who were born into this world have dreamed—and gave some up when they lost their way.
Now, those who dream of staking their lives to challenge themselves and their peers have gathered here, at this festival!

「For Hokkaido—Rokuzon Academy.
For Tohoku—Kyomon Academy.
For North Kanto—Donrou Academy.
For South Kanto—Hagun Academy.

For Kinki—Bukyoku Academy.
For Chugoku-Shikoku—Rentei Academy.
For Kyushu-Okinawa—Bunkyoku Academy.
And last but not least—our debutant, Akatsuki Academy.

「Thirty-two have been chosen from among the eight schools, each one a magnificent knight.
Even so, only one may claim the title of 'Seven Stars Sword King'—the name of Japan's number one student knight!
Therefore, we shall decide the better man with sword in hand, for is that not the chivalric tradition?

「…Our thirty-two young, noble champions.
The time is now! If only at this time, none shall reproach you!
Fight as you wish, as you will—fight with everything you have!
With this, I declare that the sixty-second Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival… has begun!」

---

1. *Teppanyaki*: Japanese dishes grilled or fried on an iron plate.

2. *Takoyaki*: Deep-fried minced octopus rolled in flour batter.

3. *Okonomiyaki*: A Japanese savory grilled dish similar to pancake.

4. *Rangetsu*: A restaurant in Ginza, Tokyo known for its beef dishes.

5. *Nagasaki Champon*: A noodle dish of fried pork, vegetables, and seafood in soup, regional to Nagasaki.

6. *Ringer Hunt*: A chain of Japanese fast-food restaurants, specializing in champon.

7. *Bay Dome*: A large glass and metal dome which houses the Osaka Maritime Museum.

8. *Otoro*: Meat from the oily belly of blue fin tuna, considered high-quality for making sushi.

9. *Star of Naniwa*: This is a play on Moroboshi's name, as the kanji for -boshi means "star". Naniwa is the old name for Osaka.

10. *Ichiban Boshi*: "Number One Star"

11. *Noren*: A fabric sheet hung between rooms or on a doorway as a divider.

12. *Taisho era*: The reign period of Emperor Taisho, lasting between 1912 to 1926.

13. *Surströmming*: A traditional Swedish dish made of Baltic Sea herring fermented to a characteristically extreme odor and acidic taste.

14. *Butatama okonomiyaki*: Okonomiyaki in the classic Osaka style, topped with pork.

15. *Shinkuuha*, 真空波: "Vacuum Wave"

16. *Mukou Kekkai*, 無空結界: "Airless Barrier"

17. *Tiger Bite*: This uses the kanji 暴喰, *Boukui* ("Cruel Devouring").

Chapter 3: The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival Begins

破軍学園壁新聞

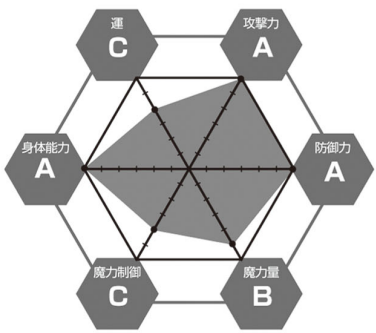
キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

OMA KUROGANE

黒鉄王馬

■PROFILE

所属：国立暁学園三年
伐刀者ランク：A
伐刀絶技：月輪割り断つ天龍の大爪
二つ名：風の剣帝
人物概要：元武曲学園校内序列一位



かがみんチェック！

日本人学生ただ一人のA級騎士。小学生の頃はU―12の世界大会で優勝したりして、かなり名の知られた選手だったけど、中学生になってからは公式試合には出なくなっていたよ。
七星剣武祭にも去年までは出ていなかったんだけど、今年になって復帰。何処で何をしていたのかは謎だけど、その実力は健在。間違い無く、この大会の優勝候補の一人だね。

Part 1

Elsewhere, in Tokyo's Hagun Academy, a knight woke up in an infirmary.

"…Nnn…."

Heavy-lidded eyes opened to reflect an unfamiliar white ceiling.

Where… am I?

The young woman was slightly confused by that sight. It was partly because she had indeed nearly never been in a hospital—but it was mostly the grogginess that came of waking from a long slumber. Though once she did understand what was going on, she sat upright reflexively—and doing so alerted the blonde, emerald-eyed Kanata Toutakubara to the sound of moving sheets.

Kanata turned her eyes from the television mounted in the room and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Ah! Touka-chan, you're awake… thank goodness!"

"Kana-cha-ack!"

Seeing Kanata by her bedside, Touka attempted to call out to her, but wound up biting her tongue hard.

"Ahm ahl tongue tieedd…."

"I guess it's no surprise that your body is a little dull. You've been napping for quite a while, after all."

"I was asleep…?"

Well then, how had she come to sleep for so long that her body felt this heavy? As Touka tried to marshall her fragmented memories—

「Now then! The turning point in the first round of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival is presently drawing near. On the cards is the

much-anticipated final matchup of Block B, Hagun Academy's Crimson Princess—Stella Vermillion! Her opponent, Kyomon Academy's Icy Laughter—Mikoto Tsuruya! Our analyst, Muroto-pro, is here with us. Muroto-pro, what do you think of this match— 」

The words coming from the television screen brought the memories flowing back.

During Akatsuki's attack, she had led the student council against the Sword Emperor of Wind Ouma Kurogane in order to protect Stella Vermillion, and had been defeated by the former. What happened after that? She didn't know, and with an ashen face she turned to Kanata.

"Kana-chan, what happened!? What about Stella-san!? Are Kurogane-kun and the others alright!?"

"They're fine. The Hagure sisters managed to protect Vermillion-san. Kurogane-kun sustained some injuries, but he has since recovered and is currently on-site at the event. As for us, we were all wounded by illusionary form, so there is nothing particularly wrong with us—except for you and the vice president. The two of you took too much damage, and thus lapsed into a comatose state."

"Uta-kun as well?"

"Yes."

Kanata's gaze moved behind Touka. Following suit, she noticed Utakata lying in a deep sleep on the bed next to hers.

"…Uta-kun…."

"Similarly to you, his recovery has only been slowed because of extreme exhaustion, and thus the vice president's life is not in danger. I think he will likely awaken later today, or else tomorrow."

"Is that…so…haaa…."

Having heard the details of that which had transpired after she had lost consciousness, Touka sighed heavily.

For now, I guess I did execute the bare minimum of my duties as Student Council President….

At the very least, she had managed to prevent that attack from completely destroying Hagun Academy, and that was enough. Still, all this was thanks also to her friends who had chosen to remain on the frontline with her.

"Thank you, Kana-chan."

"…Haha. Please do give the others your thanks too. They'll definitely be happy."

"Yes, I'll do that."

「Oh, no, it appears that we have a problem!」

A cry, almost one of anguish, could be heard from the television.

"Oh my, it seems like quite the uproar there. I wonder what the trouble is?"

"I don't know. What could it be?"

Naturally, their eyes shifted to the TV screen. In it, they could see a bespectacled man almost raining sweat.

「Oh dear, it seems that representative Stella Vermillion has neither arrived at the venue nor responded to the signal for the match to begin!」

Now that was unexpected.

"Eeeeehhh!?"

Part 2

She didn't respond to the signal for the match to begin? Something like that…!

Having heard that Stella was fine from Kanata, this broadcast surprised Touka all the more.

"Kana-chan. Earlier, you said Kurogane-kun was at the venue—does that mean Stella-san was not together with them?"

"I'm not sure of the details, but it seems that she took losing to the Sword Emperor of Wind quite hard, and thus sought out Saikyou-sensei to train her one-on-one afterward. I think this may be why they did not travel together as a result."

"So that's how it is. But then, if she was travelling with Saikyou-sensei, why would she be—"

Why would she still not be at the venue by the time that the festival began? Kanata and Touka were puzzled. In the meantime, they continued to receive information from the TV broadcast.

「Ah, we have just received a message from the judges. Representative Stella Vermillion has contacted them to inform them that due to a train fault that has delayed her ride, she will arrive at the venue late.」

「That's quite the problem. But isn't the party for the representatives supposed to be held two days before the event, to discourage these things from happening?」

「That's true. She was supposed to have arrived in Osaka together with the other participants from Hagun…. Oh dear, what's this? Representative Mikoto Tsuruya has requested that the judges grant her a victory by forfeiture!」

"Might Stella-san wind up losing by forfeit at this rate?"

Kanata asked, watching the screen with a concerned expression. Touka shook her head.

"No, I'm sure she'll be fine."

Having participated in the previous Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival as the team captain, she had at that time by and large gotten a good grasp of the festival's rules.

"It is not a rule that participants have to arrive two days before. In the event that someone is indeed late, that match can be postponed."

「Well, the judges has presently sent us its ruling. They declare that "in accordance with the rules, the fourth match of Block B shall be postponed—therefore, we will not recognize a victory by forfeit."」

「Then there's nothing to it then. Those are the rules, after all.」

「Are there any penalties for being late?」

「There will be none in this case, since the delay in the train schedule has also been confirmed by the judges. Nonetheless, it would be good if we could formalize arriving two days early as a rule—it would prevent such things from happening.」

All decisions concerning the running of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival were made via consensus of the judges. Like in many other fighting competitions, this decision could not be reversed once passed. In other words, thanks to this decision, Stella was no longer in any danger of forfeiting. Kanata sighed in relief.

"Haa. That really had me in suspense."

"But if she cannot make it before the time that the match was shifted back to, she is out."

It would be good if she could, though….

Incidentally, Stella's match would have been the last of Block B's first round matches. At that moment, an announcement came from the venue.

「Everyone, your attention please: there will be a ten minute intermission while we prepare the ring, following which we will promptly begin Block C's first round matches.」

"So we're already at the halfway-mark of the first round. It's shocking that I missed such a good deal of it. Say, Kana-chan, is Kurogane-kun's match already over?"

"No. His is the fourth match of Block C, which is after this."

"That's great…."

If nothing else, Ikki was the one who became a representative by defeating her. As Raikiri, his was one match she could not miss.

"By the way, who's his opponent?"

"Ah, right, you didn't see the tournament brackets since you were unconscious at that time…."

"Yes. So, Kana-chan, who is Kurogane-kun's opponent?"

"This matchup would be of great interest to you, President."

Kanata made a complicated expression, as though trying to suppress a wry smile. Touka suddenly had a horrible premonition—

"The Worst One's opponent in the first round is… Yuudai Moroboshi, the Seven Stars Sword King'."

—that hit the mark almost immediately.

"Kurogane-kun drew the short straw in the first round once again, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did. It was like this too during the selection tournament…. I think he just doesn't have any luck in general."

"But I suppose one could think of it as the necessary trials that a hero must go through, no?"

Still, what bad luck, to have been paired against the Seven Stars Sword King right from the get-go. Adjustments had been made to the tournament style to adapt to the sharp decrease in the number of competitors this year, resulting in the seeding being discarded. It seemed that Ikki had lost out as a result.

It's as if he's some kind of trouble magnet….

"As Raikiri, who has fought them both, what do you think of this match between the Worst One and the Seven Stars Sword King?"

Kanata asked suddenly, looking to Touka for a prediction. She was probably bored now that the broadcast had been temporarily been replaced by commercials due to the break.

"Well, let's see…."

Touka closed her eyes, thinking.

"Sixty to forty in favour of Moroboshi-kun, I'd say."

"Sixty-forty. That's quite a narrow margin, considering that it's the Seven Stars Sword King."

"This conjecture seems like an exercise in improbability if we consider their respective places in society, but I have my reasons."

"And what sorts of reasons are those?"

"Kurogane-kun has a good affinity for opponents like Moroboshi-kun. Do you know of Moroboshi-kun's Noble Art, Tiger Bite?"

"It's the ability to dispel other Noble Arts, isn't it?"

"Yes. Blazers are capable of performing superhuman feats known as Noble Arts. In other words, we can use magic. Therefore the ability to devour and negate magical abilities grants its user an overwhelming advantage over all sorts of Blazers. The water of Lorelei, the fire of the Crimson Princess, the wind of the Sword Emperor of Wind—none of these are of any use against Moroboshi-kun. His *Tora-Ou* will simply tear them all to pieces."

"True. You were forced out of close range by it as well, President."

Touka nodded. A year ago, she had been stalemated in long-range combat due to Tiger Bite dispelling all of Raikiri's lightning bolts. Without any other options she had attempted to use Raikiri's extreme

swiftness to end the battle without giving Moroboshi the chance to counterattack, but his skilled spearmanship ensured that she never got in range to use Raikiri, resulting in her defeat. To her, those were the memories of a bitter defeat.

"Now that you put it like it, it really is a rather overpowered skill."

"It is. It's only useful against Blazers, but as far as that goes, its ability to one-up any Blazer is unbelievable… however, Kurogane-kun isn't someone who relies on magic in battle in the first place. He relies on martial arts to an extent that is rare amongst Blazers, only using magic at the most opportune moments. On the other hand, Tiger Bite is a Noble Art that exists purely to negate other Noble Arts. It does not itself have any offensive power. As such, Moroboshi-kun's offensive options would all be limited to his spearmanship—his own martial arts."

Therefore the outcome of the match between the two was predicated on a contest of martial skill. This was a contest in which a sword was at a disadvantage in terms of reach as compared to spear.

"That said, I don't think that a reach advantage alone is sufficient to bring the Crownless Sword King to heel."

Her Raikiri had been sealed by that reach advantage last year. But Ikki's mobility, judgement and the sheer number of tricks he had up his sleeve at mid-range had long surpassed the level of a student knight. It would be a tall order to keep a swordsman of that level pinned within one's attack range, even for the Seven Stars Sword King.

"So the Seven Stars Sword King being upset in the first round…."

"…Is a distinct possibility."

At the very least, it wouldn't become a one-sided match. Of this Touka—having fought both Sword Kings—could be sure. Ikki's skill in close-range combat was undoubtedly national-class. He could even contest for the crown of the Seven Stars Sword King.

Even so, drawing the Seven Stars Sword King in the first round isn't something you can even call bad luck.

But if he was at his peak, he could cause a huge upset.

"Do your best, Kurogane-kun!"

So she hoped, and sent Ikki her support from afar—from Tokyo to Osaka.

Part 3

「Everyone, your attention please. As we have completed the ring preparations, we will now begin the first round matches of Block C. Representatives from Block C, please gather in your holding rooms.」

Once again the scene moved back to the mortar-built Bay Dome, where the announcement that preparation work on the ring surrounded by artificial grass was being made.

That announcement also reached the ears of Ikki and company, who had been leaning on the spectator fence watching the previous matches.

Ikki turned to Shizuku and Arisuin, who were with him.

"I guess it's time for me to go to the holding room."

His was the fourth matchup of Block C. As such, there was little reason for him to rush, but neither was there any excuse to be late.

"Do your best, Ikki."

"I will be praying for your good fortune in battle, Onii-sama…i that said, the nerve of that woman Stella, really. Leaving aside not arriving for her own match, she is even late for yours."

"Isn't the order of importance supposed to be reversed, normally?"

"After this, I'm going to use the killer techniques I learned in *One Hundred and Eight Ways to Bully the New Wife* to beat her down."

"Haha… please show some mercy. Later, then."

Having so mollified Shizuku, who was displeased that Stella had not been the first to come forward and cheer her brother on, Ikki bade them farewell and then headed off to the holding room. He had been holding a relaxed expression on throughout their time together, one so calm he didn't seem to have no battle later today. Perhaps it was due to this that Shizuku heaved a sigh of relief after seeing him off.

"That's good. Onii-sama doesn't seem as nervous as he was before."

"Haha. Well, he did fight the Twin Wings before, so why would he be afraid of an opponent of the Seven Stars Sword King's level?"

Finding Arisuin's words reasonable, Shizuku nodded. That battle had done her brother good. Of that she had no doubt.

Just then, a familiar voice rang out.

"He~llo, you two! Haven't seen you since yesterday!"

A young woman in a white robe waved as she walked towards from the direction in which Ikki had left.

"Kiriko-san…."

"Well, well, don't we keep bumping into one another lately?"

"Hmmm, that's true—it's almost like fate is drawing us together."

"Being fated to be with doctors isn't quite my style, though."

Kiriko shrugged at Arisuin's joke, and then her face turned serious.

"I passed by the Worst One just now. Did something happen to him?"

"I think Onii-sama is really relaxed. Why do you say that?"

"Exactly. He's too relaxed. As we passed, I tried a quick check-up on him. His pulse, temperature, perspiration… even his circulation and hormone balance were way too calm. Normally, these values should at least change somewhat before a fight in anyone, but for him there was no change in any of them."

This was hardly the reaction of a human being. As Kiriko explained, Ikki had been in a state of excitation when meeting Moroboshi the previous day. As such, his display today of a complete lack of such excitement meant that—

"He is forcing himself to relax, and overly so. He wasn't like this yesterday… then, his level of excitement had been just right for combat. There might be something he's uneasy about."

Something Onii-sama is… uneasy about…?

"Are you really, really sure about this?"

"I couldn't tell you what he might be uneasy about, but I'm certain of my diagnosis."

"Might he be trying not to waste more energy than necessary by relaxing?"

"I wouldn't think so. A suitable amount of excitement can raise your ability in combat… in fact, I found it concerning precisely because he should be the sort of knight who understands this principle."

An ominous silence fell at Kiriko's ill-omened diagnosis, and in the disquiet Shizuku recalled the things they had heard from her the previous night after parting ways with Ikki—the things they had heard about Yuudai Moroboshi, the person Ikki was soon to fight.

Part 4

"What did you mean by a 'tragic sense of duty'?"

Ikki wouldn't win. Having heard Kiriko say this with surety, Shizuku pressed her for an answer. From her perspective, it felt like she was insulting her brother unfairly, but Kiriko couldn't have said such things without having her reasons.

"…Moroboshi-kun's sister was at the store today, right? I think you already found out about it, but she cannot speak."

"Yes, we heard from the Seven Stars Sword King that it was some sort of mental condition."

"It's his fault that she is unable to speak."

"What… did you say?"

"Well I don't think so of course, but he does, because no other reason could be found."

After that, Kiriko spoke about the origins of Moroboshi's sense of duty.

It had all begun six years ago—in the tragedy that had occurred when he bore the moniker of the 'Star of Naniwa', Kansai's top young knight.

"It was a holiday. Moroboshi-kun and his family were going to a theme park by train when the accident happened. The event itself made the news country-wide, so I'm sure both of you know of it, no?"

Shizuku nodded. She had indeed seen it while at her parents' home.

"As I recall, it was a terrible tragedy that claimed the lives of a few hundred people. As for the Seven Stars Sword King being involved, I hadn't heard about that till Onii-sama told me about it today."

"Yes, many lost their lives in that accident. In fact, that he is alive at all makes Moroboshi-kun a lucky man. He did not escape unscathed, however. While his parents and sister only sustained light injuries, he was severely wounded. In fact, he lost both his legs."

"Lost…? You mean, he became disabled…!?"

"Yes. As the culmination of modern medical science, the iPS capsule is capable of re-attaching lost limbs—arms, legs, and in some circumstances even the head. But its miraculous ability is limited to re-attachment only. It could not regenerate legs that had already been ground into paste."

In other words, Moroboshi's injuries had not been reversible by medical science.

"Thus, even though his life was saved, the Osakan hometown hero, the one whom many had held great expectations for, seeing him as one of the most talented people after the Yaksha Princess… was forced to retire just before the elimination matches of the elementary school league's upper bracket."

How frustrated he must have been. How awful he must have felt. And yet, Moroboshi then could not even stand on his own two feet. He could not possibly fight in that state. Though it was a bitter choice, the Star of Naniwa accepted his fate then. His inherent positivity allowed him to get over it and walk path separate from that of a knight. But—

"There were people who could not get over it in the same way he did."

One was Koume Moroboshi, Moroboshi's younger sister. Why? The reason… was a most cruel one.

"The one who had said 'I want to go to the theme park' that fateful day was her."

"Then…! Then, she…."

"Yes, Koume-chan blamed herself."

If she hadn't suggested that they go to the amusement park, her brother wouldn't have lost his legs, and more importantly the bright future that had been promised to him. Because of her selfish request —indeed, she continued to blame herself most strongly—so strongly that her heart broke. In the end, she lost the ability to speak, almost as though to banish that selfishness.

"To think something like that happened…."

"Diseases of the heart are very difficult to cure. Unlike injuries or illnesses, the method by they may be cured differs greatly from person to person. We doctors, sadly, are helpless. But there is one man who can cure Koume-chan."

From what she had spoken of duty from before, Shizuku and Arisuin could deduce the identity of that one man.

"That would be the Seven Stars Sword King, Yuudai Moroboshi himself."

"Yes, the abnormality that arose in his sister lit the fire in him once again, who had given up the path of the knight before."

It had been half a year after the incident, when Moroboshi had somehow gotten wind of the fact that she had been researching a method to utilize the body's cells to regrow lost limbs via magic, and came to her.

「Doc, please. Help me fight once again!」

He likely had not consulted his family at all before dragging himself from Osaka to Hiroshima, bringing only his muddied, wounded body… and a singular determination.

"I accepted without hesitation. Of course, it wasn't because I was moved by his passion or anything. To me, his arrival was just awfully convenient, as I was looking for laboratory rabs for my research.

Haha, I'm a cruel woman aren't I? At that time, I thought that I could do anything, that it was fine for me to do anything. So I stepped into the realm of the gods, and created new parts to replace the missing ones."

"So, Moroboshi's current legs are…."

"Yes, I cannibalized components from the rest of his body at the molecular level and coalesced the dispersed parts into a pair of false legs."

As another water user, Shizuku was rendered speechless at the skill of the White-Robed Knight. The number of water users in the whole world who could recreate a pair of new legs for someone who had lost them could not be more than three. Moreover, by her method all the components would originally come from Moroboshi himself, thus ruling out the occurrence of foreign body rejection as might happen in a transplant.

However—

"Hmm, but don't the legs account for close to half of the human body's total mass? Wouldn't a transfer of that sort be detrimental to the rest of the body?"

Arisuin's question was exactly the same as that which Shizuku was thinking. And their fears were spot-on.

"You have a good eye for this. It's as you say. We had problems. First there was the severe atrophy of his musculature all across the board, to point where his life was in danger. The density of his bones was also decreased due to the creation of the large and robust leg bones, thus causing him to develop osteoporosis."

In the period just after the operation, Moroboshi had been so weakened that the mere act of inhalation and exhalation would cause his chest bones to ache. He was closer to death, most likely, more than he was right after the accident.

But that was only the beginning. In order to allow his by then thoroughly skin-and-bones body to regain a satisfactory degree of mobility, he had to build up his muscle mass. He also needed to do so as quickly as possible, as his reduced musculature would soon lose the ability to sustain his basic bodily functions.

Thus Kiriko had forced him, with that stick-thin body of his, to undergo an exercise regimen meant for first-rate athletes.

"Of course, it was unpardonable to make him do that with his body all the same."

His hollowed bones broke, his weakened muscles tore. His softened tendons split, his nerves snapped everywhere. Swallowing his agony, he ran on shattered legs, lifted dumbbells in ruined arms. His wounded body was healed each time by Kiriko's recovery magic, but that only meant that he would experience ruination for times uncountable.

It was a reckless process no different from torture. Vomiting and incontinence became everyday occurrences. In the end—

"Three months. That was how long it took to give up."

"That was unavoidable. Such recklessness…."

"Or should I say, that it's amazing that he could hold out for three months."

The common opinion between Shizuku and Arisuin had been that three months was way too long. It had clearly surpassed the bounds of treatment—could anyone continue doing such things?

Yet reality went against their reckoning.

"And that's where you're both mistaken. The one who gave up… was me."

"Eh…?"

"At first, I had always treated him like a lab rat, observing his progress and writing it down in a journal. But even though this seems obvious… he isn't a lab rat. He's a living being with the same shape as me. Watching that living being writhe in the throes of pain that had far exceeded human tolerance for days, for weeks, I couldn't stay calm… to be honest, I was going insane. Even in my dreams, I could hear his cries of agony."

After three months, she could not but think of her research as the work of the devil. She had to stop this immediately. The existing technology for prostheses was amazing. They could neither replicate very subtle movements nor allow mana to flow through them like one's original legs, which meant that Moroboshi could not again become a knight, but were advanced enough to would pose almost no obstacle to one's daily life.

Wouldn't that be enough?

Thinking thus, she had requested that Moroboshi cease the rehabilitation process and allow her to perform the operation that would return the flesh in his legs to his upper body.

"…But he told me this."

Even today, she could not forget his words then, could not help but remember them. With sweat matting his brow, and his breathing a mess, he said—

「Y'see, Doc. What d'ya think were the last words Koume spoke? Her face all messed up with tears, she said, 'I'm sorry'. Since then, I've never heard a thing from her. It's all my fault, it's all because I'm so pathetic. She has to bear a burden she shouldn't have to cuz' I was hurt. She jus' wanted to go t' the amusement park, but now she thinks that kind of cute selfishness is a sin… so I can't let it end here. I wanna let her know. That she don't need to apologize none. That she don't need to worry none. But I can't do it with this pathetic body. The things I lost in that accident—my legs, my strength, my place in

the world—I'm gonna get 'em all back, to show her with results, not words like 'I'm okay now', or I'll never forgive myself! That's why…! Until I make Koume forgive herself and become able to speak once more, it don't matter how many times my bones break or my muscles tear…! I ain't ever gonna let her see my bent back ever again! That's what… an older brother is!」

"As he said, he never stopped—never even desired to stop—till his rehabilitation was complete… and after a few years, his desperate hard work finally bore fruit. The Star of Naniwa Yuudai Moroboshi returned to this stage, his strength not at all less than it was before."

And then he climbed, all the way to the summit of Japan's student knights—becoming the Seven Stars Sword King.

"Even so, the duty that Moroboshi-kun had set himself is not yet complete. Until the day that Koume-chan speaks again, he will always be a desperate man."

His desire for a serious match with Ikki therefore did not stem from ambition, but rather, it was all for his sister. The flame in him—that sense of duty as a brother that had brought him crawling out of the depths of hell—had not extinguished, but rather burned on.

"Having always been watching him, I can promise you. The Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi is not someone who can be defeated merely by having the ambition to beat him. People who fight for others important to them are very strong."

Part 5

Just remembering what had been said about the ferocity of Moroboshi's ardor for battle made Shizuku shiver.

Taking back his sister's voice—it had been for that reason that Moroboshi had been able to recover from seemingly irreparable injury and make a comeback, even overcoming a rehab process akin

to torture. His tenacity and determination were both extraordinary.

Moroboshi-san is, without a doubt, strong.

Not only in body, but also in spirit. He was not someone Ikki could defeat if he went into battle with doubts on his mind.

Onii-sama…! Please pull yourself together somehow!

So Shizuku watched the blue gate which her brother would come out of with emotions akin to prayer. And as she looked—

"Ah…."

There, in the spectator stands above the blue gate, sat a petite girl with bob-cut hair—Moroboshi's sister, Koume Moroboshi. Like Shizuku, she had come to watch her brother, who would some emerge from the red gate.

…Her expression looked horribly pained.

「Ehem. Everyone, your attention please. We apologize for the long wait. Now, we shall begin the first first-round match of Block C!」

At the announcement, both Shizuku and Koume's eyes turned towards the ring.

If she were in Koume's shoes, how would she feel? How would she feel if Ikki had lost his legs because of her, and then plunged himself into a world of hurt and fought others for the sake of reclaiming her voice, while she could do nothing but watch—how would she feel then?

"…Ah."

Just thinking about it felt as if she herself was being cut to the heart.

Part 6

Unlike the Block B matches, which had ran into some problems, Block C was going very smoothly. In the midst of all this, Moroboshi returned to his holding room following his usual warm-up, and looked a piece of paper on his pipe chair.

「Do your best!」

It was written in circular, cutesy lettering.

Last night, he had not returned to the hotel. After getting Ikki an ambulance, he had returned to the store, where the crowd had yet to thin in any way. In the end, there had been no time to go back. This piece of paper had been given to him by Koume just as he was leaving the house this morning.

Before heading off to attend the opening ceremony, he had asked her.

「Hey, could you tell me to do my best, like you always do?」

He would request this before every match, as though it were some sort of good-luck charm. As always, a conflicted look would flash across Koume face before she could school it into a smile and then write that message.

Just as always.

As he looked at the message, Moroboshi remembered that face that he had seen in that moment. That pained, apologetic expression. He knew why she would think this way, why she would make that expression. She understood that it was for her that he had stepped back into the world of knights. Of course, he had never once asked for her gratitude or told her anything of that sort. But they were siblings by blood, and thus she had been able to guess the gist of his thinking. That was why she hesitated. For how could she merely cheer from the sidelines for her brother, who was fighting for her sake, as though it were not her business?

Having seen through her thus, Moroboshi… had smiled gently.

"Silly."

You don't have to think that you need to apologize, Koume. You did nothin' wrong. Don't worry, just take it at your own pace and get well again. Even if it's years, decades… it don't matter how long it takes. So till then, I won't lose. Until you realize that you didn't take nothin' away from me, till the day you get better, I'll keep winnin'! And when that day comes, please, like you used to long ago—

「Representatives in your holding rooms, your attention please. The third match is now over, and the fourth match will now begin. Representative Ikki Kurogane of Hagun Academy and Representative Yuudai Moroboshi of Bukyoku Academy, please proceed to your respective entry gates.」

"Shaa! Time to kick some ass!"

Watch me closely now!

Part 7

「So, in the third match of Block C's first round, representative Byakuya Jougasaki showed us his strength, splendidly knocking his opponent out of the ring for a ten-countdown KO. As expected of the previous first-runner up, wouldn't you say, Muroto-pro?」

「Yes… but nonetheless, a victory by countdown just doesn't sit well with me as a knight. I understand that the rule is in place to ensure the safety of the participants, but I can't help but prefer duking it out in ring.」

「I see. I think there might be many in the audience who feel the same way. Let us look forward to seeing that in our next match! Ladies and gentlemen, the wait is over! We bring you now what is

probably the most anticipated match today—the fourth match of Block C!」

With commentator Iida's words as their cue, the fence on the entrance gates began to lift, and the contestants for the fourth match walked in.

「First up, from the red gate, we have the reigning champion—Bukyoku Academy's third-year, Yuudai Moroboshi! The hero of the west, with his ingenious spearmanship and his ability to devour magic making him the Blazer's natural predator, climbed to the summit of Japan last year! His road was by no means a smooth one. He once lost both his legs in an accident he encountered before the U-12 tournament. This ended his path as a knight, and he was forced to retire as a result. But he's back! Back from the depths of hell, from overcoming that irreparable injury all the way to the top! Whether it be a knight's glory or a knight's reverses, he knows them all and fears them not! The Seven Stars Sword King, Yuudai Moroboshi, is here today in this ring to try for the unprecedented—a second straight victory at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival!」

In that moment, the cheers shook the ground.

「Ho-shi! Ho-shi!」

「Would you listen to these cheers! They're shaking the Bay Dome! As expected of the hometown hero, he's immensely popular!」

The thunderous adulation was like the rumbling of the earth itself. Surely, no other student knight in Japan could garner such applause. Being on the receiving end of the spectators' expectations, Moroboshi materialized his Device *Tora-Ou* and raised it aloft as though piercing the heavens.

"Shaaaaa!"

As if to say "leave it all to me!"

「Ooooooooohhhhh!」

「What is this? Representative Moroboshi! Despite the earth-shaking applause, he doesn't flinch! He doesn't cower! Not even before such expectations, such hopes! He can carry it all on his shoulders—what a young man! What a man!」

「That's what's so amazing about him.」

「Oh, what do you mean?」

「As you said before, Iida-san, he recovered from an injury thought to be impossible to recover from. Thus he should, more so than others, be conscious and uneasy of his body's condition. But he did not show cowardice, or show any uneasiness. Rather, he carried and then lived up to all the expectations he received. As though to say 'I'm alright, there's no need to worry about me.' …Also, I once underwent the same recovery procedure as Moroboshi-kun.」

「So, Muroto-pro, one of your legs is a prosthetic?」

「Yes. After all, even the loss of all four limbs is quite common in the KOK tournament. Thus there is a rather large demand for such recovery operations. However, myself included, there are almost no cases of it succeeding. Do you know why that is?」

「No, I don't. Could you enlighten me?」

「To tell the truth, the operation itself has a hundred percent success rate. It is the rehabilitation that most everyone cannot pull through. The operation is a procedure that takes one's existing flesh to recreate the lost parts. Thus, various post-op complications such as a result of severe osteoporosis and loss of musculature causing the performance of one's internal vital organs to drop. But because the body will not restore the lost muscles without training, one has to undergo muscle training in order to return one's body to its original state as a part of the rehab. That means undergoing countless instances of muscle tearing and bone-breaking… I'm a grown man, but I couldn't take it. Within three days, I was begging the doctor tearfully to return my leg to my body. But Moroboshi-kun managed to pull through that hellish rehab, and even gained strength incomparable to before. It is not

something that could be done with extraordinary spirit and resolve. Honestly… I can't imagine it. His heart, skill and body are all on a higher plane. I don't see anyone defeating a Seven Stars Sword King with this much grit, courage and tenacity.」

「So we might expect to see the first brace of victories in the history of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festivaaaaalll! And now, the Seven Stars Sword King's first opponent is entering the ring!」

As Iida spoke, all eyes turned to the blue gate. Amidst the gazes, a young man walked in calmly, his black sword in hand.

「I'm sure many of us here recognize this face! Having been embroiled just prior in a scandal involving the Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion, he is the very first F-rank knight to make the stage of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival! But don't be fooled by his rank—his strength is certified genuine! In his school's selection process, he defeated Raikiri Touka Toudou—who gave our reigning champion a difficult time last year—in a single strike, and even defeated A-rank knight Stella Vermillion herself in an unofficial duel. A knight of abnormal strength, to whom someone gave the nickname Crownless Sword King! Wielding the weakest magic alongside the strongest swordsmanship, he is this year's most-watched dark horse! Here he comes now into the ring—Hagun Academy's first-year, representative Ikki Kurogane!」

The response to Ikki's arrival was not as uproarious as when Moroboshi entered, but was loud all the same. Everyone was waiting to see what sort of waves this unusual F-rank knight, who had come to compete for the number one spot in Japan at this stage, would make.

Having witnessed the passionate responses of the crowd, Arisuin swallowed.

"The time has finally come. Ikki is finally standing on the national stage."

The ill-fated knight whom no one expected anything of, whom they

treated unfairly, had come to stand here in the ring of the nationals, to be acknowledged by all. As one from the same school, and as one who had been with him all through the school's internal selection matches, Arisuin could not help but feel deeply moved by this scene.

"Yes… but what Onii-sama is aiming for is still further ahead. He cannot lose in this place."

Shizuku said so a little stiffly, before turning to Kiriko.

"How is Onii-sama right now, Kiriko-san?"

"Hah. Just a moment…."

Kiriko closed her left eye.

"*Doctor Scope.*"

Channeling magic power into her right eye, she began to examine Ikki. Then, she gave a mild smile.

"Hehe～♡. As expected of someone who accustomed to strife and conflict, I must say."

"What happened?"

"The abnormality that I detected when I passed him earlier is gone. He's fully into the battle now. His hormone balance and blood pressure are maintaining an optimal state of nervousness and excitement. He probably managed to sort out his emotions during the waiting period. Pretty impressive. You needn't worry, Shizuku-chan. Your brother is undoubtedly—in the best condition possible!"

With this, the stage was set, the actors ready. The gongs of war sounded.

「Now then! The Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival—Round One, Block C, Match Four! The match between Yuudai Moroboshi versus Ikki

Kurogane begins! LET'S GET STARTED—!」

Part 8

The instant the signal to begin was given, Ikki kicked off the ground, charging Moroboshi head-on.

「Oh, wow! It's representative Kurogane with a quick attack right off the bat!」

The crowd roared, echoing the surprise of the play-by-play commentary at Ikki's taking a swift offensive against the Seven Stars Sword King. A maneuver that considered not the situation, they felt. Was he thoughtless, perhaps? Rushed, hasty?

But Arisuin on the other hand called out in praise of his decision.

"Good judgment!"

"Alice?"

"In any case, Ikki can't do anything at a distance—he has no abilities with reach. So the key to victory is to get through the attack range of a spear and put the battle within the range of the sword."

Thus, a quick attack was a good tactic.

"The spear's long reach is simultaneously its advantage and shortcoming. If the spearman's guard is breached, then one would gain an advantage in a single blow!"

"But Moroboshi-kun definitely knows that as well. He will not let someone breach his guard that easily."

As though to confirm Kiriko's words, Moroboshi shifted from his defensive stance. Leisurely bringing his spear *Tora-Ou* to bear tip

first, he stood ready, and then—a chill ran down goosebumped spines throughout the spectator stands of the Bay Dome.

This included Shizuku.

"What… what a guy, to be able to exude such pressure just from taking a stance…!"

Yes, the source of the shivers was the pressure exuded by Moroboshi to the surroundings even as he took up his stance. Even the uproar of the crowd from earlier was silenced by that presence—tens of thousands devoured in an instant by one man standing in the ring.

Even Ikki, who had been closing for a quick attack, was forced to a halt before that pressure. This was that which had stopped Yui Tatara in her tracks two days ago: Moroboshi's Yuudai's Happo Nirami.

But it was only for a moment. Putting more power into his legs, Ikki continued his charge.

「Representative Kurogane! Despite stopping once, he's unafraid! He charges in bravely!」

「That's a strong heart he has there. A normal person would be left trembling and immobile before that kind of presence, but he is not slowing down at all.」

But this was known to Moroboshi—that this level of scare tactic could never work on the Worst One. He stood stoically till the moment Ikki entered his weapon's range. Then—

"Shii!"

—steel flashed.

Tora-Ou bared its fangs, piercing the air. Ikki backpedaled out of range, trailing wisps of his hair as they scattered gently to the wind. Perhaps he had just been a little slow to react to the spear's speed.

Moroboshi's reaction filled the crowd with cheers.

「It's, it's razor sharrrpp! It's like you can hear the sound of the spear splitting the air from up here in the commentator's box! Kurogane, he's had to fall back—with just one strike, Moroboshi has blunted his assault!」

「It's not only one strike.」

「Eh?」

「Zoom in on the Worst One's chest.」

Having been told this by Muroto, Iida zoomed the camera in. And there on the dome's giant LCD screens, indeed—nicks in Ikki's uniform could be seen.

「Th-This is…! There are spear-point cuts on his clothes in two different places!」

「Yes. Including his hair, that makes three. That is the Seven Stars Sword King's *Sanrensei*[1] a high-speed spear technique that from a bystander's point of view may seem like only one thrust, but in fact strikes three points at once. It's easy to pay attention to Moroboshi as a fighter possessing the strongest anti-Blazer ability, the destruction of magic. But his well-honed spearmanship is, in my view, is his greatest weapon. Getting past his guard is an extremely tall order. The Worst One was strongly wary of this, and that's why he didn't step within Moroboshi's range.」

This was common sense. After all, rushing headlong at a spearman who had you in his line of sight was recklessness, for a spear was a weapon that boasted unrivaled strength when engaging opponents in a straight line. If a frontal surprise attack did not work, then one should find a way to engage from the flanks—again, par for course.

That was why Ikki's next course of action took everyone aback. He neither ran nor leaped, but merely walked as if strolling, closing the distance between himself and Moroboshi. His movements devoid of

all killing intent, he stopped about one and a half metres away from the latter. Not close enough to reach him with his sword, but close enough for Moroboshi to reach him with his spear!

「Wh-What!? What does Kurogane mean to do? It's almost as if he's just saying 'come on, hit me!'」

The commentators were also in confusion. Indeed, it was an incomprehensible action. Just by looking, one would think he was provoking Moroboshi. Some members of the audience took it up.

「Hoshii! You gettin' licked! Go kick his ass!」

「Don't let some punk from Tokyo look down on ya!」

An outcry poured forth from one section of the stands. And as though responding to their voices—

「Moroboshi's made his move! The Seven Stars Sword King initiates a furious assault upon his fearless foe!」

—he displayed once again his technique, a continuous barrage with Sanrensei too fast for the eye to catch. Spear-tips formed a dense rain of death descending like a volley of machine-gun fire.

It was undodgeable. Or it should have been undodgeable, and yet—

「It's not hitting! It's not hitting! Even with its famed speed, Sanrensei can't even graze him! What graceful footwork! His movements are so elegant as he dodges the spear's point that one would think he was dancing!」

While standing within the range of Sanrensei, a technique that could pierce three points in a single breath, Ikki was—unlike before—moving from side to side and dodging all the strikes.

He had not closed the distance without thinking. Sanrensei was an amazing technique. It could even be considered superhuman. But he

knew of something that was faster and keener by far: the Sword Eater's Marginal Counter. Reflexes and speed so beyond human ken that they could create the illusion of eight simultaneous slashes at once. Compared to that, his eyes were more than sufficient to follow Sanrensei, which did not have the same pressure as a technique that could make you see eight simultaneous, illusory strikes. As long as he read the spear's trajectory with a calm mind, he could easily deal with it.

Before long, their engagement had lasted ten seconds, with Moroboshi attacking and Ikki evading. Then, judging that Ikki was handling his attacks with ease, Moroboshi took large strides backward, opening the distance between them once again.

「Unable to stand his ground, Moroboshi retreats! What is this? As if returning the favor for the pressure put on him before, Kurogane has pushed the Seven Stars Sword King back without striking a single blow!」

「What… what's going on?」

「You kiddin' me…!?」

「A-Awesome! Is that knight really an F-rank?」

「So cool!」

「Reactions are mixed here in the stands! These two really know how to put on a good show!」

「As expected, his blowing away past Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representatives in both the 'Hunter' and Raikiri isn't just for show. This is the first time I've seen a representative who can move this intensely and swiftly at mid-range. Nonetheless, neither of the two have gone all-out just yet.」

Muroto mumbled. He spoke the truth. Though Moroboshi looked like he had been beaten back, a smile tugged at the edges of his mouth.

"You've got serious balls to use me as a warm-up tool. You all good now?"

He asked.

"Yes. Thanks to you, I've realized it."

Indeed, during their exchange of offense-defense, neither of them had pressed their attack. Ikki had remained within the danger zone, continuously taking the risk of dodging Sanrensei by a hair's breadth in order to confirm that his body would not lock up from fear.

And having realized Ikki's intentions, Moroboshi had accommodated him. It was for this kindness that Ikki was thanking him.

Indeed, thanks to him, he was able to confirm this—

"—that I am without a doubt at my best today!"

The extension of his legs were optimal, his body's movements crisp. His sight was broad and clear. He had evaded Moroboshi's spear-strikes by the skin of his teeth, but felt no fear in his heart. The abnormalities that had presented themselves when he had faced Ouma the previous night were gone.

He would be fine. He could fight! Having felt this, he took up a stance, allowing killing intent to infuse him for the first time since arriving here. Seeing Ikki like that, Moroboshi nodded.

"Nice. Then, free service time is over. I'm gonna get serious from 'ere on out!"

The pressure he exuded doubled. As expected of the Seven Stars Sword King, even locking gazes with him made breathing difficult.

But I can do this. I can win.

After all, he had divined a certain truth from their previous clash.

It's just as I felt when watching the videos of him from before… there is a fatal weakness in Moroboshi-san's spearmanship!

Part 9

"He's got a good look on his face. It seems that Ikki has seen through it—the Seven Stars Sword King's flaw."

Touka murmured from her bed in Hagun Academy's infirmary as she watched the TV broadcast of the back-and-forth exchange between the two.

"A flaw?"

"Yes. I'd say that he researched Moroboshi's replays many times, and then confirmed his suspicions during that engagement."

"I can't claim to understand anything about that. What could his weakness be?"

"Hmmm… Kana-chan, what do you think are a spear's offensive options?"

Having been asked a question in turn, Kanata thought briefly before answering.

"It's the thrust, naturally. Isn't it?"

"Well, it is true that the spear is a thrusting weapon. But it has another option that derives from its absolute reach advantage, and that is the sweep."

Spears only had blades at their tips, so one would not make as strong an impression as a sword as a sweeping weapon. But in truth, it would be folly to thusly think less of a spear sweep. A blow powered by the centrifugal force of a robust rod well over one meter in length

could break human bones with ease. In fact, some forms of Chinese spearmanship regarded thrusts as feints. In other words, these schools of martial arts used the thrust as a decoy to cause the opponent to dodge before using the spear like a staff as the main means of attack.

"However, the sweep is a non-entity in Yuudai Moroboshi's spearmanship. It's not just this match. Ever since his comeback, he has relied on a thrust-only setup and has not used a sweep even once —that includes the match with me."

"Wow, I didn't notice that."

Kanata expressed her surprise in an elegant manner upon hearing the truth.

"Still, why does he only use thrusts? Does he feel that he does not need to use anything else?"

"It's true that the thrust is very strong since it requires little movement to achieve the speed it does, and it focuses all one's strength on the spear tip, giving it great offensive power. Especially when one considers that Sanrensei has almost no delay between retracting and thrusting with the spear, you could call it the ultimate attack form. So it is as you say, Kana-chan. He doesn't need the sweep —though it might be a different story if the opponent is an expert like Kurogane-kun."

For all its speed and sharpness, the thrust was a point-type attack, and lacked the area control abilities a sweep would have. A point attack was easy to see through, and once unleashed would put one's body in a forward extension, open to counterattack.

"This is something similar to what is called a 'dead blade' in kendo."

"In other words, it shouldn't be difficult for Kurogane-kun to defeat Moroboshi-san's style with his reflexes, should it?"

"That's so… normally, that is."

At that moment, Touka gave an impish grin, a rare sight.

"Normally?"

"Unfortunately, the man that Kurogane is facing isn't normal. If Kurogane-kun's thoughts are as I mentioned just now, he's in for a lot of pain… just like me last year."

「Oh my! Once again, Kurogane takes the initiative!」

Just as Touka said that, battle was joined once again in faraway Osaka. Having ascertained that there was no fear in himself, Ikki closed the space between them, intent on taking advantage of the flaw that he had seen in their previous clash.

「But Moroboshi isn't going to let him get close this easily! He meets him with Sanrensei!」

Of course Moroboshi would take advantage of his reach to strike the first blow.

One!

He juked to the right, evading a first blow aimed at his brow.

Two!

A step to the left, the stab for his heart elegantly evaded.

A technique that launched three strikes in a breath. It was brilliant, but ultimately it was something built up from training. It was not as flexible as Sword Eater's Marginal Counter, a superhuman technique derived from unique natural bestowment. He could deal with this and still have room to spare.

That's the second. The next is the last! After the next blow, Moroboshi will have to breathe.

Most likely, three strikes in one breath was his limit. Thus, Ikki chose the third and final blow as the timing for his counterattack.

With this strike, I will score the opening hit! It probably won't take him down, but it will allow me to take the lead in this battle!

The very third blow he was aiming for was flying towards his thigh.

Three—now!

Regardless of how amazingly fast it was, it was still a point attack. If he moved but a millimeter away from that point, it would miss. He would take another step to the left, move into range of his sword—

Then cut his body as I pass him—

At that moment when Ikki had evaded the path of the spear with his sidestep and was stepping in range to cut Moroboshi—he saw something impossible.

The *Tora-Ou* that he should have evaded had made a hard left. Like a snake seeking its prey, the spear-tip sought him out.

"Uuh!"

Even though he was surprised by this unexpected sight, he made the call in an instant. Forsaking his charge, he made a great leap to the left, getting out of the spear's range.

But it was a risky evasion… and an imperfect one, at that.

「Wh-What!? With Kurogane dodging the three strikes gracefully, and Moroboshi only defending, one would think that Kurogane had the advantage—but it was reversed in an instant! He's been cut across half his ear! The Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi has the first strike!」

The stands were in an uproar from that opening blow. Ikki on the

other hand shivered slightly, heedless of the blood dripping down from his ear.

Wh-What was that last thrust? I didn't see that in any of his replays!

He had studied Moroboshi's replays countless times in order to come up with a way to exploit this flaw, but *Tora-Ou* had never never showed him anything like this. Was this a new technique? No. There was something very odd going on if that was the case.

Why didn't the commentators mention this technique?

Could it be that—

—They can't see it?

Part 10

Ikki's estimation had been spot-on. The curving spear had gone unseen by the audience.

"Aah! What a pity! I had a good feeling about him going in there…!"

Arisuin's lips quirked downward as Ikki failed to seize the opportunity at the very last moment of his attack. What a pity—he had been so close, too. So Arisuin said, for he could only see that Ikki had failed to evade Sanrensei's final thrust. If he had known what had happened in that instant—of how Ikki had sprung a trap as he struck at the apparent weak point of Moroboshi's thrust-only spearmanship style, and how Moroboshi had shattered the premise that a sidestep out of the spear's range would render one safe with his surprise attack—he probably would not have said that. Many besides Arisuin were similarly fooled.

"Was it really 'just a pity'?"

But Shizuku had doubts, even though she could not see that curving thrust.

"What do you mean, Shizuku?"

"Look at Onii-sama's face right now."

Even from that far away, they could see that Ikki was shaken.

"If he had merely failed to dodge, his wariness wouldn't be this blatant. Something happened in that ring, something we couldn't see —and that was surely Moroboshi-san's intention."

There was someone else who had predicted this turn of events from the beginning. That was Touka Toudou, Raikiri, back in Tokyo.

"As I thought, he used it…."

That she could predict this was a matter of course. After all, she had faced the exact same in her turn the previous year.

"…Though I couldn't evade it and took a rough hit in my side."

"Um, President. Is there some sort of secret to that thrust? I couldn't see anything except that Kurogane-san seemed to fail in evading Sanrensei's last strike."

"As I said before, the weakness of the thrust lies in the ease of dodging it. However, Moroboshi's thrust has overturned this logic by… well, Kana-chan, his thrust can bend in the direction in which an opponent evades and pursue them."

"A bending thrust, you say?"

"Yes. Moroboshi has eliminated the vulnerabilities of the point attack through the use of this homing thrust."

"But, President, I couldn't see it bending. And besides, Blazers should

only have one ability, and Moroboshi's has nothing to do with changing his reach. I don't think he possesses a Noble Art that would allow him to manipulate the shape of his Device like Sword Eater either."

"I suppose it can't be helped that you didn't see the spear bend. From the first, the spear itself isn't bending. It is as you say, Kana-chan. This was not the result of using Noble Arts—in other words, it is a martial art, just like Sanrensei. At any rate, Moroboshi-kun has control over the flow of the battle now that he has scored the first strike. This is now do-or-die for Kurogane-kun."

Just as Touka had said, the battle began once again.

「The Seven Stars Sword King has stepped forward! He's going on the offensive!」

Part 11

Attacking while I'm still in confusion. He knows it's his time!

Ikki frowned as Moroboshi advanced towards him for the first time since their match had begun. Moroboshi undoubtedly knew that he was wavering.

Swish!

The spear shot out once again, aiming for his legs. He was trying to limit Ikki's mobility.

Let's not think about attacking for now and just focus on evasion! I'll get back in the swing of things as I dodge!

Dodging the thrusts by taking half a step backward, he attempted to calm himself down. Each thrust seemed to split the air—he could not stop. He to wait for the decisive opening when the spear, having

missed, would stab into the stone floor—

The opening he imagined occurred in that instant. And yet, the spear that should have aimed for his legs suddenly shot upward, making for his face!

Uwaaa!

Jerking his head back, he narrowly avoided it, but still received a shallow graze to the cheek.

There's no mistaking it! While I don't understand the principle behind it, Moroboshi-san's thrust bends!

A spear, ramrod straight as it should have been, was as fluid as clay. It was an impossible sight, but seeing it twice had cleared all his doubts. And it was not just twice; all of Moroboshi's thrusts thereafter curved. Up and down, left and right, ever changing according to his will—chasing Ikki wherever he fled.

This is nuts. If I just sidestep, I'll be skewered!

This technique was not one to use knife-thin dodges on. He had no other option apart from seeking to completely escape the spear's attack range, and this he did with all his might.

「What's happening to Kurogane? Watching him flee helter-skelter, it's almost as though the beautiful dodges from before were a lie! It's like it's taking all he has just to escape!」

That's really true!

Ikki made a wry grin at the commentator's scathing remarks.

But escaping was not the same as losing. To flee was to avoid losing. No matter how unseemly he looked, he still sought victory. He did not run because he was afraid. Even as he scurried about he continued to observe Moroboshi, the gears in his head turning as they

sought to come closer to the secret behind Moroboshi's homing thrust.

The commentators have made it quite clear—the audience can't see what's happening.

If they could see the homing spear, the commentators wouldn't have said what they had. Rather than commenting on Ikki's desperate scurrying, they would have praised Moroboshi's amazing technique.

Which means that the mechanism behind the homing thrust has to be—

"What's wrong? You ain't gonna win just by runnin' away, Kurogane!"

Once again, a flash of steel pierced the air. All this time, it had been this oncoming flash of silver steel that had been the focus of Ikki's attention. Which was normal; a mysterious technique was bound to attract attention after all.

But that's a mistake. I shouldn't be focusing on the tip, but rather on Moroboshi's hands!

In that instant, Ikki saw through the homing thrust. It did not escape his notice that Moroboshi would change the way he angled his elbows and flicked his wrists, changing the trajectory of the spear mid-thrust.

As I thought… so that's how it is!

Indeed. From the first, the spear itself did not bend. The 'bending' phenomena was an optical illusion caused by the subtlety of the switch-up.

To bend as one thrusts, and pierce as one bends. Easily said, but to perform that action while performing a series of three thrusts so swift that an outsider would only see one was no simple matter. This was beyond human reaction speed. It was not something one could do just by dreaming it up in one's head. It was something Moroboshi had carved into himself through an astounding amount of training, into

his flesh, his bones and his blood. This spear needed no orders from his brain to pursue the enemy.

This was Yuudai Moroboshi's technique *Houkiboshi*[2], a martial art so expert as to seem like magic.

What amazing technique….

Even without the natural sense that the Sword Eater had been born with, he had managed to create a miracle, a move had surpassed the boundaries of humanity through sheer hard work. As a fellow martial artist, Ikki had to respect Moroboshi. It moved him above all else to see someone reversing the weakness of the thrust—the simplicity of evasion—and even working that flaw into his combat style. It was wonderful to have been able to come to the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival and face off against such an amazing knight.

But I won't be satisfied by just crossing swords!

He now knew that Houkiboshi was a purely physical technique. Thus, he too could attack. It was simple—Houkiboshi's strength lay in pursuing and attacking the opponent while they were in a defenseless post-evasion state.

Therefore—

"—I simply won't dodge at all!"

He switched up his battle plan suddenly. Houkiboshi, which had been aimed for his throat, was batted aside by *Intetsu*. He no longer paired evasion with retreat, but rather advanced in defense.

"Kuh—!?"

Moroboshi immediately retaliated with his Sanrensei-Houkiboshi combination, but the secret was out—if one did not attempt to dodge, then it was just like any other thrust. Ikki closed the distance slowly, parrying each strike and sweeping them away as they came.

「Whaaat! Kurogane has changed things up! Giving up dodging, he's breaking through bravely from the front! Sparks fly as the flashing blows rain down, but he's pushing them aside and approaching steadily!」

At this change of pace from Ikki, Moroboshi frowned for the first time since their match began. For a normal opponent, the act of advancing while knocking the high speed thrusts of Sanrensei aside should have been impossible even if they understood the principle behind Houkiboshi.

But Ikki could do it. With his powers of observation, capable of such things as Perfect Vision and Blade Steal, he had already seen through Moroboshi's habits and technique to a certain extent. By chasing Ikki down as far as he had, he had shown Ikki too much.

"Haaaa!"

「Moroboshi does his utmost to keep delivering high-speed strikes! But it can't stop Kurogane! It can't stop him! That phalanx of spears is being cast aside!」

「Like this, the Seven Stars Sword King will have trouble. The strength of the spear is its reach: if an enemy gets inside his guard, then its combat ability will be reduced by half! Moroboshi has to push him back somehow!」

But now that Ikki had a read on him, Moroboshi could not prevent his advance regardless of how quickly or often he struck. As it stood, it was only a matter of time before he would enter the sword's attack range. And having gained such an advantage, a swordsman of Ikki's caliber would never miss his opportunity. Once he got within Moroboshi's guard, this battle would be over!

Finally, Ikki breached the threshold. He was only one step away from the extent of his sword's reach.

"Shit—!"

In a last ditch effort to stop Ikki in his tracks, Moroboshi once again unleashed Sanrensei. But it was no use. Having stolen Moroboshi's technique, Ikki could instantly read the trajectory of Sanrensei from the angle Moroboshi's elbows were set at and the shifting of his gaze.

Deflecting the first and the second strikes, he matched his timing with the prelude to the third—and stepped into range!

「With this Kurogane's got Moroboshi in his sights!」

Seeing the Seven Stars Sword King being hunted down, a cry went up through the stands.

「Run, Hoshiiii!」

But there was still one strike left in Sanrensei. Like Houkiboshi, it was a high-speed maneuver honed from untold amounts of repeated practice, the process of which was carved into the body and left no room for thought. Even if they wanted him to flee, he could not. His body moved to aim its last blow at Ikki's chest!

But Ikki had already seen this—Moroboshi's habits, his angle of attack, the spear's trajectory, all of it. He could not possibly miss striking this blow!

Once I deflect this last strike, I'll be in range! In one go, victory will be—

—But in that moment, a flash ran through his brain.

No, wait, this is bad—!

And then, something unbelievable happened in the ring. Ikki, who should have succeeded in his pursuit of Moroboshi, was pierced in the shoulder by *Tora-Ou* and knocked back out of his sword's reach.

Part 12

「Whaaaaat!? What happened here? It was apparent to everyone that Kurogane's assault was about to succeed, but he was suddenly knocked back! Taking a hit to the shoulder, he was sent flying out of range in one go!」

"That's not possible! Onii-sama would never slip up in that situation!"

Shizuku was clearly flustered by this unexpected development. But beside her, Arisuin had gone pale as he witnessed something even more unbelievable.

"Shizuku! Look at *Intetsu*!"

As he cried out, Shizuku too saw that impossible sight.

"That… that can't be…!"

「This… what would you call it? Kurogane's Device, *Intetsu*, is broken! It's as though a huge beast just took a chunk out of it!」

Indeed, the crystallization of Ikki's soul, his blade Device *Intetsu*, had a large part of it sliced off.

「What happened? A Device shouldn't even bend, let alone break, unless struck by a great force, but…!」

The commentator was again in confusion. This was only natural. A Device was constructed by crystallizing magic power with incredible density. Even after having broadcasted matches between knights for a long period of time, Iida could only count the number of times he had seen a Device break on one hand.

On the other hand Muroto, who was in charge of the analysis, was enthusiastic.

「No, there is an exception!」

「An… exception?」

「Yes. Please look closely at the Seven Stars Sword King's *Tora-Ou*!」

At Muroto's words, all eyes were on Moroboshi. And then everyone noticed. At some point, his spear had become clad in a golden aura.

Everyone knew what that aura was.

「This, this is! The Seven Stars Sword King had activated Tiger Bite at a certain point in the fight!」

This was the same anti-Blazer Noble Art Tiger Bite for which Yuudai Moroboshi was famed, and which had even dispelled the Sword Emperor of Wind's Noble Art Kusanagi the previous night.

「But why would he have activated Tiger Bite? Kurogane wasn't even using any Noble Arts…!」

But even as Iida said this, his faced changed as he seemingly came to his own conclusions.

「It couldn't be…!」

「So you noticed, huh. That's it. To dispel a Noble Art is to dispel the magic therein. And that which a Blazer invests magic power into is not limited to their Noble Arts. Their weapons, the Devices, are also made of magic power! It seems that the Seven Stars Sword King has somehow learned such a frightening technique in the one year since he took the title. Last year, his Tiger Bite had only been able to dispel Noble Arts, which a Blazer only puts a portion of their power into. But this year…i it can even shatter a magic construct of such high density as a Device!」

Even in faraway Tokyo, Touka Toudou gasped as she witnessed this development in the battle.

"For such a thing to…!"

"President, this… is this going to be fairly hard for Kurogane?"

"…'Fairly' doesn't even cut it."

Yes. "Fairly" didn't even begin to describe it. The Device represented a Blazer's soul. If damaged or broken, the mental feedback was painful enough to easily render them unconscious. With Tiger Bite possessing the power to destroy even Devices, even the very act of crossing blades with him was like exposing one's heart to him and requesting death.

Luckily, Ikki's blade had not been completely shattered this time, but there would not be second chance. His *Intetsu* could not take another hit from *Tora-Ou*.

This also meant that Ikki had lost his means of dealing with Houkiboshi.

There is no target of opportunity—!

They all felt a shiver at the terrifying nature of Tiger Bite—Touka and Kanata, who were watching the broadcast together, as well as Ikki's companions on-site.

Ikki thought differently. More so than the technique—it was the person called Yuudai Moroboshi who caused him to tremble.

What a terrifying person…!

Tiger Bite was indeed a formidable ability. Even if he only possessed that ability, he would be able to dominate the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

But this knight he was fighting did not do so. He did not revel in that overwhelming power, but instead planned intricately, reeling Ikki in. From the first Sanrensei, all of his actions had been but foreshadowing. First had he used Sanrensei to lure Ikki into range, and then use the weakness of the thrust as bait before retaliating with Houkiboshi.

Of course Ikki would feel that he had been had, realizing that

Sanrensei had merely been a bait for the real trap to be the sprung in the form of Houkiboshi, the real killing move. And then he, as a fellow Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative, had been able to quickly see through the fact that Houkiboshi was a physical technique that needn't be dodged but rather parried—and he would attack thusly, entering Moroboshi's guard.

But this was all according to Moroboshi's scenario.

Houkiboshi was not the killing blow. Indeed, it had never been meant to be the finishing blow, but rather bait to coax Ikki into the situation where *Intetsu* would meet *Tora-Ou* head on… all so he could drive Tiger Bite into the Blazer's critical weak point—their Device!

One would think that with such an ability, he would be more rough.

But instead he planned meticulously and efficiently, striking at the gaps in his opponent's thought process. If he had not doubted himself in that instant—thinking "If he can destroy Noble Arts, he could destroy Devices as well"—and thus delayed his attack, *Intetsu* would surely have been shattered and he would have been defeated.

"Man, what a pity. Jus' a little more and I could've devoured that dull blade whole."

"Kuh…!"

The Moroboshi who stood before Ikki now had lost all trace of the panic he had shown before—no, it was with a fearless grin that he eyed Ikki as Ikki bled from the shoulder.

At this point, Ikki was certain. That this man Yuudai Moroboshi whom he was facing seemed rough in speech, brash and bold… but in reality he so clever it gave one the chills. His every action and every move was executed in order to reel Ikki in. Regardless of what opening Ikki tried to exploit, the depth and flexibility of his strategy meant that he acted as he wished, closing in all the while.

He really thinks far ahead….

Only five meters lay between them, but to Ikki it seemed a faraway, foggy destination.

So this is the domain of Japan's number one student knight, the Seven Stars Sword King…!

Part 13

"This situation looks quite dire."

Arisuin muttered as he watched the two of them separate, creating another stalemate. Now that Moroboshi had started to use Tiger Bite, Ikki could not parry his strikes and advance. In other words, he had lost the ability to deal with Houkiboshi, and though Arisuin and the others did not know of its existence, watching Ikki have trouble dodging several times they too knew there had to be some secret behind that thrust. Thus Shizuku could only nod, troubled, in response to Arisuin's muttering. Already, he had twice been on the cusp of victory only to suffer an instant reversal. Ikki was clearly the one on the offensive, but Moroboshi had yet to be scratched even once. From an observer's perspective, it was obvious who was controlling this battle.

"To think that Onii-sama would be played so thoroughly…."

At that moment, someone from the side piped up, questioning Shizuku's pessimistic remark.

"I wonder about that."

It was a tall woman in a suit.

"Madam Chairman…."

It was Hagun Academy's board chairman Shinguuji Kurono. She stood beside them, lit cigarette in hand as she corrected Shizuku's miconception.

"It's true that from here it seems as though Ikki has been dancing in the palm of Moroboshi's hand, and to be honest the flow of the battle has been in the latter's hands up to now. But it hasn't proceeded as he had planned. So while he looks quite composed now, he probably isn't as calm inside."

"What do you mean?"

"That Tiger Bite was supposed to be the result of layer upon layer of traps, the ace that decided the match. But the match didn't end there. Kurogane noticed at the last possible moment that his target was *Intetsu* all along, and used his body to shield his Device."

As she said, Moroboshi was probably rueing the missed opportunity. Such a surprise attack could not be counted on a second time. Ikki would not let *Tora-Ou* strike *Intetsu* again.

"In other words, Moroboshi's best-laid plans have gone awry, thanks to but one moment of quick wit on Ikki's part."

In that case, the match was back to square one—indeed, considering that Moroboshi had revealed more of his aces, he was at a disadvantage.

"In any case, Moroboshi isn't the only one here capable of outsmarting his opponent."

Of course, Ikki could not hear Kurono from where he was in the ring. But coincidentally enough, they seemed to be thinking the same thing at that moment.

"As expected of the Seven Stars Sword King. You really gave me a fright there, Moroboshi-san."

"Hope you ain't gonna call me a coward. 'Hoistin' em by their own petard' is a real old trick."

"Of course I wouldn't say that. In fact, I'm quite fond of that tactic myself."

As they spoke, Ikki lifted his head, a cheeky smile—almost as one about to pull a practical joke—on his face.

"Hence, now it's my turn to give you a fright, Moroboshi-san."

Indeed. Ikki too prided himself in being able to incorporate tactics and trickery into his martial arts. He wasn't about to be outfoxed and leave it at that. He would get Moroboshi good one, he would not settle for less.

And he had already thought of a way—a way by which he could fake Moroboshi out and end this match.

Part 14

「Oh my! Kurogane has just issued an unexpected challenge! Even after being shown the distance between himself and the top of the Seven Stars, he's not afraid! He's not backing down!」

「Tha'ssa way, Kurogane! Don't lose in terms of spirit!」

「Do your best! Ikki—!」

Despite the match having taken a turn for the one-sided, Ikki's unquenched fighting spirit caused cheers to rise in the spectator stands. Ignoring them, Moroboshi thought carefully on the words of the man before him instead.

He… doesn't seem like th' sort of guy who'd bluff.

But he couldn't imagine what the play would be. Ikki could no longer parry Houkiboshi with his sword. With Tiger Bite activated, that would be like suicide, no different from surrendering the match. Ittou Shura changed nothing. With Tiger Bite, *Tora-Ou* was a voracious eater that could even devour Kusanagi with ease, much less magical power of Ikki's level. It was also a technique with a time limit, not something to be used against an opponent with the power to dispel magic like himself.

So where did his confidence stem from? He could not imagine it. And precisely because he could not imagine it—

—That's why it's interesting.

His lips turned upwards in delight.

"So, weren't you gonna scare me?"

It wasn't often that someone would come up with a plan that he couldn't see. It would be a pity if he didn't witness it. In preparation for whatever he was going to do, he once again leveled the point of his spear at Ikki with a heave of his shoulders.

"…I say that, but I won't let you off if you show me somethin' borin'. We Osakans hate borin' stuff."

"Do look forward to it."

Saying this, Ikki bent low, his legs readying to kick off.

"Then… here I come!"

He kicked off the stone flooring, as though trying to break it, and charged towards Moroboshi.

「Kurogane initiates! And he's fast! His speed hasn't gone down at all since the start of this match! He's already been repelled twice by the pinnacle of the Seven Stars! This is his third attempt—will it be a success?」

Iida's commentary was full of excitement, as was the expectant crowd as they wondered what the meaning of Ikki's challenge was.

「Well, if you want to say it's fast, it is… but, this….」

The professional knight Muroto on the other hand was doubtful. Ikki's course of action had not changed at all. He was still just charging ahead like a wild boar. Moroboshi, naturally, was similarly annoyed.

He's charging ahead? Hasn't he learned his lesson…!?

And he was even doing it without Ittou Shura. It should have been proven to him quite thoroughly that he could not break through Houkiboshi with just physical skill. Thus, to simply go for a full frontal strike again the third time was a little uninspiring.

"Kurogane. I said it before. I won't be satisfied if you show me something boring!"

Naturally, he met Ikki with Houkiboshi, the homing spear that had given him so much trouble earlier. And—

"Rip em' to shreds! Tiger Bite—!"

Enchanted with the ability to destroy magic, Houkiboshi became a blow that could neither be evaded nor blocked. Ikki's attempt to dodge to his right to evade the oncoming spear was something Moroboshi had seen too many times. Not missing a beat, he adjusted Houkiboshi towards that side. This time, it would pursue the fleeing Ikki and pierce his throat.

Then at that moment—Ikki, whom he should have had precisely where he wanted him, dissipated like a mirage.

Haa!?

The foe he should have given a mortal blow to had disappeared. Unable to comprehend that, Moroboshi was speechless—and then he noticed.

Ikki, whom he had stabbed leftward towards, had circled him to the right and stepped into the attack range of his sword.

Wh, what is this!?

「Moroboshi has made a terrible mistake! Of all things, his spear missed! This is big, too big a mistake!」

That was wrong. Moroboshi had not made a mistake, but rather he had been played by Ikki. Shizuku and company, who had witnessed that very technique before, realized that.

"Shizuku, that was—"

"Yes! It's definitely Shinkirou, which he used in the match against Ayatsuji-senpai!"

Indeed, this was one of Ikki's self-created sword techniques, the fourth secret sword Shinkirou.

It was a special form of footwork that alternated between quickness and slowness, creating afterimages in front of himself that deceived his opponents into cutting thin air. In this case Shinkirou utilized not front-and-back afterimages but side-to-side ones, fooling the Seven Stars Sword King.

Goddamn it! I was fooled by an afterimage—!

Moroboshi too was a first-class student knight. He knew what had gotten him, what his opponent intended. And having analyzed this, he immediately executed the best possible counterattack. Having no time to sweep his spear back around, he had to use the butt of his spear to strike.

This was his best course of action… but it wouldn't make it in time. Moroboshi knew this. Ikki had chosen this tactic based on the enemy-chasing Houkiboshi's blind spot, and having completely outplayed him, he had stepped into range. This would be the fatal blow, irrecoverable even with the most suitable counteroffensive. Ikki's blade would reach him faster than his own strike would. He could no longer avoid it either.

At the moment, Moroboshi knew that he had been beaten.

Thus he was shocked when the next moment, the butt of his spear connected with Ikki's cheek, sending him sailing away.

「Ohhh! What brilliance from Moroboshi! Realizing that he missed, he immediately executed a reverse thrust with his spear butt! He's knocked Kurogane, who circled around to the left, beyond sword range again! Kurogane was once again unable to stay within the reach of his weapon! This is the Seven Stars Sword King's imposing defense!」

The applause rained down upon Moroboshi for his third successful defense. But it did not enter his ears.

That… wasn't my play!

He understood that in that moment, even though he had done all that could, his counterattack would not possibly have landed first. That is, if Ikki had not committed a fatal error in those final decisive moments.

Could it be that—

Moroboshi's heart wavered in doubt. Naturally, he remembered the previous night. The figure of Ikki's body freezing up during the battle with Ouma.

As I thought, there's somethin' off 'bout you, Kurogane!

And unfortunately, his guess was spot-on.

Part 15

Ikki's mind reeled from the spear-butt hit that he had taken to the skull. His brain juddered, his vision swam.

Again…!

The symptoms that had emerged in the fight against Ouma the previous night had lain dormant till now. At that critical moment

when he was about to defeat Moroboshi, they had resurfaced, causing Ikki's body to not move as he desired.

Damn! What's happened to my body?

「Surely you do not think that you could continue as-is after having fought the world's strongest swordsman? Even if your body is fine, she left her mark on your spirit.」

Did I really… break?

Did his terror of Edelweiss unknowingly become a fatal wound? Ikki broke into a cold sweat as thoughts of that affliction that was at once unknown and unknowable passed through his mind. His companions recognized the abnormality.

"What's going on? That was the moment to finish the match, but I could see that Ikki's movements suddenly dulled."

Kiriki concurred with Arisuin.

"Indeed he did. Moroboshi-kun's counterattack was very quick, so it was hard to notice, but he clearly slowed down."

"So Onii-sama… really is too nervous…."

Kiriko shook her head in response.

"No, that's not it. If he was nervous, he should have frozen up a lot sooner, and in any case I doubt that your brother is the sort of knight who would freeze up due to mere nervousness. Even if there were something wrong with him, he would still perform the right movements… but it's precisely because of this that his problem might be more serious."

"S-Serious!? What do you mean by that? Has something happened to Onii-sama's body!?"

"At the very least, he doesn't have any visible injuries. There can be no mistake in my diagnosis. His body was perfectly fine, and the injuries that he has sustained in the course of this match… well, they're not serious. Therefore, I think it is likely that the problem lies within instead. I'm not an expert in patients with mental conditions and thus can't give you a clear answer, but there is an affliction among fighters that is known as 'Punch Eye'. Harboring an extreme fear for their opponents attacks, the bodies of the affected fighter will freeze and become unable to move. It's a severe illness that can end the fighting careers of the afflicted."

"Are you saying that Onii-sama has that condition!?"

Shizuku cried out, realizing vaguely that something out of the ordinary had happened to her brother.

"Calm down. As I said before, this isn't my specialty. I'm just giving my opinion on the possible causes…. That said, he did fight and lose to Twin Wings Edelweiss, the strongest swordswoman in the world, didn't he?"

The blood drained from Shizuku's face. She understood the meaning behind Kiriko's words. Her brother was indeed strong. However, he was not yet so strong that he could face the strongest in the world. That he came back in one piece was by itself already abnormal.

"It would not be unreasonable that he still bears wounds in his heart, where we cannot see."

"Th-That's…."

"It does seem that it might be as you say, Kiriko-san. And even if it isn't 'Punch Eye', Ikki's expression says it all—that sudden dulling of his movements at that timing was in one way or another abnormal."

Even from afar, Ikki seemed shaken. In fact, Arisuin believed the situation serious precisely because of how he fought to suppress that wavering and school the expression on his face, and yet it seemed to be beyond his ability to do so.

However—

Shinguuji Kurono, who was standing somewhat further away, had a different opinion on the matter.

This isn't 'Punch Eye' or some PTSD of that kind.

With a glance, she had found that which was afflicting Ikki even where he himself had not been able to… though perhaps it might be better to say that she had foreseen this turn of events ahead of time. Since the end of Ikki fight with Edelweiss, she had guessed that something like this might happen. Thus she knew that this affliction would not result in the end of his career as 'Punch Eye' would.

However, that doesn't change the fact that his movements have become dull. Additionally, it is likely that Moroboshi has noticed it too. Given that, the situation is indeed a dangerous one.

Part 16

Indeed, Moroboshi could read that much from Ikki's face from where he was in the ring.

He's desperate to maintain a calm front, just like last night.

His expression was that of one afflicted with a condition he himself did not understand. It was definitely a relapse of the trouble he had had the previous night.

Moroboshi sighed inwardly at this revelation. He had meant to defeat Crownless Sword King at his best, and thus prove his strength to Koume.

But we're already in the ring.

To see an opponent's weakness and yet not strike at it was to make a

mockery of their battle. He felt that it was a pity, but he would not hold back.

You showed me your fatal flaw yourself… don't think ill of me now, but I'm gonna attack without holding back!

Without reserve, Moroboshi moved to seize the victory.

「Moroboshi's moving in to attack Kurogane, who's still reeling from that heavy blow! You're backed into a corner now… can you get out of this fix, Crownless Sword King—!? 」

1. *Sanrensei*, 三連星: "Three Linked Stars"

2. *Houkiboshi*, 帚星: "Comet"

Chapter 4: Showdown - Seven Stars Sword King vs Crownless Sword King

破軍学園壁新聞

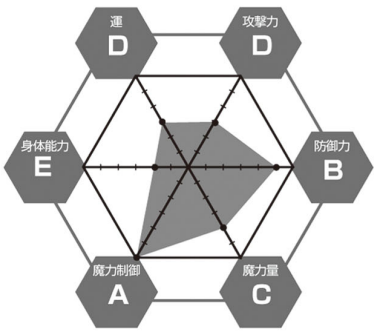
キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

KIRIKO YAKUSI

薬師キリコ

■PROFILE

所属：廉貞学園三年
伐刀者ランク：B
伐刀絶技：局所麻酔（ローカルダウン）
二つ名：白衣の騎士
人物概要：日本最高の医者



かがみんチェック！

珠雫ちゃんと同じ水使いだけど、珠雫ちゃんのように水そのものを武器として用いるのではなく、水を介して人体に干渉することによって戦うトリッキーなスタイルの騎士だよ。

医者として有能なのはもちろん、騎士としてもかなり強いけど、本人は『騎士』ではなく『医者』というスタンスみたいで、これまで七星剣武祭には参加していなかったんだよね。でも今年は『せめて最後の一年だけでも』と廉貞の先生に泣き落とされて渋々参加したみたい。

Part 1

「This match has become one-sided since that one irrecoverable spear-butt thrust! Kurogane has slowed down significantly—the number of times that he has been unable to dodge Moroboshi's spear have increased! It's a terrible situation—flowering wounds stain him crimson all over in this ring. The referees may even have to call for a stop!」

Outside the Bay Dome, the usually deserted streets were filled with people watching the broadcast on their mobile devices. The Worst One was at a disadvantage, that much was plain to the average person. Those around all seemed to agree.

「This is already over.」

「Yeah, the Worst One was moving pretty well at first, but he's totally slowed down since. It feels it's taking all he has just to evade.」

「As expected, Moroboshi is really strong.」

「'Course he is! Moroboshi's the Seven Stars Sword King, y'know? He ain't gonna lose to no F-rank!」

But amidst all this, a single voice made its maverick view heard.

"No. Ikki will win."

"Eh?"

All of them turned to follow the direction of that female voice.

There was no one there—but if one looked closely, one could see a head of flaming red hair dancing in the wind as it disappeared into the Dome.

「Eh, wait… that was… could it be…?」

Part 2

At that moment, in Hagun Academy….

「Oh dear! Kurogane has finally taken a direct hit from the spear! And it's on his thigh to boot!」

「That's not good. Like this, the Worst One's speed will only keep decreasing. It might be better for the referees to call a halt.」

"This is odd…."

As they watched Ikki be one-sidedly pushed into a corner on the television broadcast, Touka suddenly expressed this doubt.

"Yes, it is. Why would Kurogane's movements suddenly become this poor?"

"…Well, while I am concerned about that too, there's something even stranger going on with Moroboshi-kun."

"Eh? What would that be?"

"By my count, this would be three. Three times now, Moroboshi has had the chance to finish Kurogane-kun, but he hasn't finished this match yet."

"Could he be playing around with him?"

"I don't think he's that sort. But that's exactly why it's incomprehensible."

Glancing at Moroboshi's expression through the broadcast, Touka could not help but think that he looked as though he was afraid of something.

What is he seeing, I wonder?

As though to address Touka's doubts, something big happened. Ikki, who had been fleeing about, fell down.

Part 3

"A-gh!"

「Whoa! Having fled from Moroboshi's attacks up till now, Kurogane has lost his footing on the floor he has stained with his own blood and has fallen down! This is a great chance for Moroboshi! Will he end this here!?」

Ikki scrambled to his feet, "shit!" written all over his face.

But it was pointless. In a battle between knights at this level, such a mistake could not be reversed. The match was decided. Or it should have been, but—

「Oh? Somehow, Moroboshi isn't attacking! Does he not intend to strike an opponent while he's down?」

Taking his actions as fair play befitting the Seven Stars Sword King, the audience burst into plaudits.

「Great stuff, Moroboshi! That's Japan's strongest warrior fer ya!」

「But y'can stop playin' around now. It hurts jus' to watch!」

「Go get 'im, Moroboshi-kun—!」

But contrary to the excitement of his fans, Moroboshi himself was beading cold sweat.

This is… the fifth time.

Five times he had had a clear chance to finish the match, but he had

let them all slip away before his very eyes—and he himself knew not the reason why.

What's this feeling… it's weird….

The more he attacked, the more he pursued, the more the pressure exuded by this half-dead knight before him increased. This was the reason for his hesitation: the premonition that if he took a step further, he would be trampling the tail of a beast far more frightening than a tiger.

"…Tch!"

But he could not keep avoiding the issue like this.

You coward! Look your opponent in the eye!

Despite being bloodied all over and suffering in the grip of some unknown affliction, the light in Worst One Ikki Kurogane's eyes had not dimmed, his desire to fight undiminished. Ikki had not yet given up on this battle. How could he, who was winning, wish to stop!?

How could you let Koume see you like this!?

Such actions did not befit the Seven Stars Sword King, or an older brother. Pride and dignity drove him. Lowering his stance more deeply than he had all match—

"I'm coming! Kurogane—!"

With a shattering cry, he advanced towards Ikki, preparing to the end the battle.

Part 4

As he sprinted forward, faster than he had up till now, Moroboshi

activated Sanrensei. His targets were the forehead, throat and abdomen—all fatal strikes. He definitely intended to end this in one move. With this body that would not move as he wanted and his wounded leg, Ikki knew for certain that he could not evade this Sanrensei. He gritted his teeth bitterly.

「I will return that favor in full tomorrow.」

That had been their promise, but he was unable to fulfill it. He had wanted to be able to give his all against an opponent of this caliber, and yet he could not see it through. What a pity—but that was why he refused to throw in the towel to the end. That was the least he could do.

That's why I can't use Ittou Shura here.

To use his limited-time-only ace while still under the effect of this unknown affliction was tantamount to despairing. It was to nip the buds of victory—pointless. Until the moment when his consciousness vanished, he would not give up on winning, no matter how unsightly he might look. Having set his heart to this, he raised his sword, preparing to meet Moroboshi's assault. Covered in wounds, he took his stand against certain defeat.

At that moment, a memory surfaced.

Now that I say it… I had this feeling then, too.

It was a memory of his duel with Edelweiss on the Akatsuki Academy's school grounds. A memory he had been unable to recall well, blinded, dazed and desperate as he had been then. His torn-up state brought him back to that time, suddenly making those memories clearer again.

What did I do then?

To his surprise, the memory came to mind with ease. Facing the incoming strongest knight in the world, he had—

—Ah, that's right. I attempted to use Edelweiss's swordsmanship.

Edelweiss's blade had been so swift that his eyes had failed to even catch its afterimages, but he had just barely been able to read her strokes from her body's movements.

He remembered. No human eye could perceive her overwhelming speed—and the secret to that was that she did not accelerate. Usually, when a blade was swung, it would start out slow. One needed to accelerate the movement in order for it to reach maximum speed. But there was no such thing in any of Edelweiss's movements. The moment she made to step forward, she was already at top speed. As she began to slash, she was already at her maximum. An extreme stop-and-go, racing from zero to a hundred in a flash. But this technique was extremely strong. The extremities of its swiftness and slowness made the blade strokes seem many times faster than were. It was also incredibly hard to keep an eye on the blade itself, since it had no slow initial speed.

Ikki had seen through that much in their battle. Thus, he had attempted Blade Steal in those final moments. He had not been certain if it would work. But he had done it anyway, if only because that was the strongest swordsmanship known to him at that time.

What he had to do now was the same. Even if he might not manage it in his current state, this was surely the best he knew.

So, at the very least—

As Ikki thought thus, the feelings he had in his battle with Edelweiss returning to him, he gave instructions to his rebelling body.

The world's strongest swordsmanship. It was done like—

"This."

In that instant, his body became light as a feather. Like a rushing wind he weaved through the gaps between Sanrensei's spear strokes —and as he passed he cleaved deeply into Moroboshi's abdomen.

That crossing of swords happened in an instant, a flash. Without even being able to raise so much as a cry of pain, Moroboshi sank to the floor amid a mist of crimson blood.

"Eh…."

It took not a few moments for Ikki to realize that this had all been done by his hand, even as cries filled the stadium at this sudden reversal.

「Whaaaaattttt!?」

Part 5

「Wha… what just happened!?」

Iida yelled, his voice shrill.

「Just as we thought that this was the moment when Moroboshi would end this match, he was the one to fall insteaddd! I reckon he got hit in that exchange with Kurogane… b…but, I'm ashamed to say this, but it was just too fast—I couldn't see what happened at all!!」

Indeed, Ikki movements could not be seen, even by the people in the commentator's booth watching the match from afar. He had simply disappeared all of a sudden, and before anyone realized it, had passed Moroboshi by and cut him down.

Iida's eyes bugged wide in disbelief.

「What is happening? Kurogane's movements are clearly different from what he's shown up till now!」

But Muroto's surprise surpassed his.

「Impossible! That couldn't be… no, but… it could only be….」

He knew. He knew who the footwork and swordplay that Ikki had used really belonged to. Sensing his confusion, Iida pressed him.

「Muroto-pro. Do you know something about this? Is this, in fact, the Worst One's rumored Ittou Shura?」

「N-No, this isn't Ittou Shura. There was no change in the amount of magic power Kurogane was using. That… was pure swordplay! And while there are differences between two-sword and one-sword styles, I have seen that sort of untrackable instant acceleration of body and blade once before….」

「Where on earth could that be? Don't tell me, it was in the A-League!?」

Muroto shook his head.

「You can't find it in that place, because… this swordplay belongs to someone whom every country has given up on capturing due to her outrageous strength. This is the swordsmanship of the world's greatest swordsman, and its most wanted criminal in history—Twin Wings Edelweiss!」

Muroto's words caused an uproar in the audience.

「…Whaaaaattttt!?」

「Twin Wings, you mean, that Twin Wings!? But why would the Worst One know how to use her swordsmanship!?」

「No, wait, but I heard that the Worst One can steal his opponent's techniques!」

Surprised cries rang out all around. This time, Ikki's friends joined them in being dumbfounded. They understood that Ikki was someone who often went against commonly-held knowledge, but if what Muroto said was true, then this was incomparable to before.

"Did Onii-sama, really…!"

"So this is to say that he did not just return alive from his battle against Twin Wings, but even managed to steal the world's strongest swordsmanship!?"

And Kiriko objected to Alice's statement.

"That can't be! If so, why didn't he use this right from the start?"

This was the natural question to ask. Kurono, however, was quick to shoot her objection down.

"It's not that he didn't use it. It's just that he couldn't remember how, and thus couldn't use it."

"Ah…!"

At this, Kiriko remembered the conversation that Ikki had had with Yagokoro when they parted ways the previous day.

"That inability to remember was also the cause for his abnormality."

"Madam Chairman, what do you mean by that?"

"Edelweiss's swordplay isn't normal. Normally, all of a human's motions are created by the coordinated movements of muscles. However, that will not let you use Edelweiss's swordplay. To create that kind of extreme zero-to-one-hundred difference in speed, you need all the required muscles to move together instantaneously, and instantaneously muster the full strength of those muscles. A human normally wouldn't be able to send sufficient nerve signals instantaneously for that to occur."

One could not give orders to all of one's muscles at once.

"To make this possible, one needs to change these nerve signals themselves."

They had to be shaped, shaped into combat signals completely different from the ones normal humans came equipped with, signals that could be sent in shorter, more concentrated bursts. If one could not come to use one's brain signals this way, it would be impossible to command all the muscles of a complex living organism like a human being to release all their power at once.

"Ikki must have been able to touch and then get a hold of Edelweiss's swordplay from the blink-and-you'd-miss-it battle between their techniques. If even he himself did not remember it, his brain still does."

A knight of Ikki's caliber could trace that exceptional technique in their subconscious minds after having seen it but once.

"Thus, whenever he is in the zone at critical moments, his brain will release those combat signals, but like him, his body has forgotten that battle from which he gained them—thus, not having forgotten what they were for, he was unable to do anything with the foreign signals."

"So because he could not recognize the signals he could not react to them. Is that it?"

Kurono nodded in confirmation to Shizuku's words.

"Exactly. In other words, Edelweiss did not break Ikki. If anything, the battle with her caused him to evolve explosively, so much so that his own body could not keep up with that growth… but, that was only the case until now."

Faced with imminent defeat, his body had finally been able to recall the power that he had gained from duelling Edelweiss, along with that method of moving his body, so completely foreign from what he had been doing in the sixteen years since he was born.

"The engine, chassis and clutch necessary for that super-high-speed movement have finally come together—now that it's come to this, the result of this match is obvious. Yuudai Moroboshi can be considered the strongest Seven Stars Sword King in the last ten years, but his

opponent is too much for him. Even after being defeated in a duel with the strongest sword in the world, Kurogane was able to utilize his incredible learning capacity to obtain a skill that has surpassed the level of a student knight by far."

This technique was far above the caliber of what might be expected at such a tournament.

"The person facing Moroboshi now… is the real monster here."

That was why Kurono believed… that with regard to the first round matches, it was Moroboshi instead who had no luck.

Part 6

"Gah…ha!"

The feeling of something cold on his cheek—the cold stone flooring of the ring—brought Moroboshi back to his senses.

Wh…What, why am I lying down…?

Having lost consciousness for an instant, he could not comprehend what had happened to him, or that he had been hit by Ikki's attack.

For now, let's get up.

His instincts as a fighter allowed him to get up immediately even after having fallen down defenseless. Thus, even in his state of incomprehension, he got up in on reflex, and in the moment that he got to his feet and his senses returned—

"G-uaa-aaaaahhhh!"

—he groaned in agony as fiery pain seared his flank.

「Moroboshi's gotten up! But as you can see, he's hurt really badly! He's losing lots of blood, and his legs are unsteady!」

Having heard his circumstances being analyzed by the commentary, and feeling his side burn, he realized that he had been injured.

What… is this? I was cut!? But I couldn't see anythin'….

As he was beside himself in confusion, he hear this.

"Aah… I finally understand."

His opponent said in a small voice.

"Kurogane… what in the world did you just do?"

What had he understood? Was he able to achieve that speed because he had understood it?

Ikki replied as he bowed slightly.

"Moroboshi-san, I'm sorry for having kept you waiting."

"You're… sorry?"

"Yes… it's all finally come together now."

Ikki was of course talking about their promise from the previous day. To give his best, and thus return the favor—a gentleman's agreement between him and the proud knight named Yuudai Moroboshi.

Now, he was confident that he could fulfill that agreement.

"So as we agreed, I'll show it to you—Ikki Kurogane at his full strength!"

Having said this, he vanished from Moroboshi's sight.

He disappeared…!

He did not in fact disappear, of course, but having skipped the acceleration process and achieved maximum output upon stepping forward Ikki got off to a rocketing start that Moroboshi's motion perception simply couldn't follow.

Drawing a curved arc with his sprinting, Ikki went around to Moroboshi's left. Three times Ikki had been repelled by his spear, but now he bypassed its range with ease while stepping into the range of his own blade—

"Guaaaah!"

—and cut Moroboshi's right arm as he blasted by like a black gale.

"You lil' shit—!"

Whirling around, Moroboshi lashed out with Sanrensei, using the burning pain to read Ikki's location. But he could only cut thin air. Ikki was no longer there by the time he turned.

He's already gone…!

Moroboshi was momentarily rendered speechless by the speed. But he had no time to be surprised as another blow struck him, slicing into his back.

"Gaaaaah—!"

「Aah! He's been hit again! Moroboshi is letting Kurogane get into range too easily! He's completely unable to follow his movements! Once again, Sanrensei has struck the empty air!」

「It can't be helped…! Kurogane's extreme highs and lows in acceleration and overwhelming speed is something that even we cannot catch from long range, what more when it happens in front of one's eyes! It's more than likely that the Seven Stars Sword King can

no longer see the form of the Worst One!」

He had hit the nail on the head.

Sh…Shit!

Something impossible was happening before Moroboshi's eyes.

He could hear them. The sounds of any number of slashes, and of footsteps moving at a dreadful pace. His opponent was unmistakably close to him, and yet—

What is this, what is going on!?

—no matter where he turned to look, there was no one there.

It was as if he were the only man in the ring.

Was such a thing even possible? Could it even happen in real life? The ring was a round platform a hundred meters across in diameter, and there was no shade or cover in that small space. Yet though his opponent was so close he could hear his breathing, Moroboshi could not see him at all.

This… this is bad!

He could feel another slash incoming. If he continued to take hits like this, it would be dangerous. But he could no longer use his spear to fend off attacks of this speed. So he made a decision there and then.

"Uoooooo!!!"

He crossed his arms, covering his vital spots. Dispelling Tiger Bite, he released all his magic power to form an armor around his body.

「What is this? The Seven Stars Sword King, Japan's proud number one knight, has shed his pride and is going for an all-out defense!」

Moroboshi's magic power was not on Stella's level, and as such could not outright negate the attacks of an F-rank's Device like she could. But if he used all his power, he could reduce the impact of slashes from *Intetsu*. As long as his head remained defended by his arms, one or two hits would not result in a fatal injury.

However, this stance indicated that he had given up on attacking, as he could only defend from this position. Naturally, Ikki rushed in without fear!

「Kurogane isn't missing this chance! Blazing in, he attacks from every angle! It's a no-holds-barred beatdown! Moroboshi isn't retaliating! Has he lost the will to fight?」

「That's not it! The Seven Stars Sword King can't see the Worst One right now. All he can really do right now is defend himself. He's doing the best he can, indeed all he can to stay alive right now!」

Muroto was full of respect for Moroboshi's will to fight to the bitter end.

「…But, even so, we have to stop this match!」

「No way! Do you mean to say that Moroboshi can no longer turn this around?」

Muroto nodded.

「He won't. The difference between their skills is such that he can no longer win.」

Muroto had once been in the King of Knights A-league, one of only a few in the whole nation. Because of that, he understood that the difference between the two was so great as to be incomparable. His analysis, however, enraged Moroboshi's fans.

「What're ya sayin', shitty commentator!」

「Hosshii!! Don't give up-!」

So they cried out. However—

「The black wind howls on! Moroboshi's shield is dispersing—it's breaking, shattering! Is this really the end? The Star of Naniwa, the one who took the competition last year and whom everyone hoped might take the never-before-accomplished second straight title—is this really going to end without him being able to do anything?」

A sudden reversal, and from there an unbelievably one-sided battle. The occurrence of this unexpected development in Block C's fourth match had the spectator stands in turmoil.

And in those stands, Shizuku suddenly caught sight of the figure of Koume standing up and leaving. Almost as if she were fleeing.

Koume-san….

At that, Shizuku remembered the complicated expression she had made upon seeing Ikki the previous day, and the bitter, pained expression she had borne the whole time as she watched the match.

She could understand Koume's feelings, the pain she must feel. After all, her brother too was on the battlefield. She also understood that that pain was a mistake. By the time she caught herself, she was already chasing after Koume.

"You know…I might have said this before, but I really like that about you, Shizuku."

Even as she left, Shizuku's flushed a little at Alice's soft words.

Part 7

A fire safety door separated the outer perimeter of the Bay Dome

from the spectator stands. There, seated on a bench that overlooked the Osaka Bay through gently curved glass windows, was Koume. She was facing away from the ring where her brother was currently embroiled in combat.

Brother… it's already enough….

She wanted him to stop. If it was just for her, he didn't have to do this anymore. He had never said a word to her about fighting to reclaim her voice. But she understood without needing him to say a thing. That was why she was in pain. And she could not stand to see her brother bleed and be hurt for her sake. That was why she ran away.

"You aren't going to watch the match?"

Shizuku Kurogane, who had pursued her and only just caught up, asked that question. Koume jolted and whirled around at having been called suddenly, turning to regard Shizuku, who was about her height. She remembered this girl.

Ah… she came to the store yesterday… if I recall correctly….

She was the sister of the knight who was dueling her brother now. Why would she be here? Her brother was obviously about to defeat her own. Koume thought this rather strange, and as if reading that doubt showing on her face, a complex expression crept onto Shizuku's.

"I couldn't quite leave you be. Because, as a younger sister with an older brother… I understand your pain, Koume-san."

How did she know? Koume's eyes widened as Shizuku sat down beside her.

"We heard the reasons for Moroboshi-san's comeback from Kiriko-san."

Koume understood then—if it was Kiriko, then of course she would

know what had happened between them.

"…I can understand your feelings. After all, I too like my older brother the most. I feel pain when he bleeds or is hurt. It cuts me even deeper when he does it for my sake."

Shizuku's words captured Koume's present emotional state well. Now that she knew this much, there was no point in hiding, and so Koume nodded.

"You hope that if it's for your sake, he should just stop fighting."

Koume nodded again.

"You can't stand to become a burden for the man you love."

Koume nodded again—but realizing that the girl in front of her had just said something outrageous, she flushed crimson and shook her head rapidly in denial. She most definitely did not have that sort of relationship with her elder brother.

"Eh? I was off the mark? It's not that kind of love? …Really."

Why does she seem disappointed….

Having encountered an unfamiliar kind of love, Koume was confused.

"Well… even if your relationship isn't like that, you still feel bad about cheering on your elder brother like stranger when he's fighting to get your voice back, right?"

Shizuku's words, delivered slowly and in a consoling manner, struck home. Indeed, Koume truly wanted to cheer for her brother. She had been like that ever since Moroboshi had been in the elementary league, a constant figure in the stands cheering her heart out for him. For the brother she was proud of—stronger and cooler than anyone else. She loved cheering for that brother. She enjoyed it.

But now things were different. That accident changed everything. Now, his reason for fighting was to reclaim her voice. It was his duty as an older brother. That was why she couldn't cheer. She had no right to do it. Her brother was sacrificing so much for her, and yet she could not repay him. How much could she be coddled by her brother? Thinking like that was not allowed. That was why she could not cheer for him from the bottom of her heart, not since that accident.

And today, unable to contain that remorse, she had run away.

…This person understands all of that.

This embarrassed her a little, but she could also feel the kindness that Shizuku, who understood her heart and had come all the way here to say these comforting words to her, had shown.

Thus, she whipped out her handphone, intending to text a word of thanks to Shizuku—

"Nonetheless, there's nothing wrong with that. You don't need to care so much about it."

Her fingers froze at Shizuku's words, and she looked up, shocked. Of course she did. For even though she understood Koume's feelings, Shizuku was now tossing that which she had been agonizing over out the window with all her might.

But Shizuku had her reasons for saying this, naturally.

"Why not? No matter how much you… no, we wish to be coddled, it would surely be allowed. After all, we are their younger sisters, and they are our elder brothers."

The elder brother would protect his younger siblings, and they in turn relied on him. This was an unwritten rule not only for humans, but for most creatures in this world.

"Even if it were allowed to no one else, we alone can be coddled by

them."

It was their right.

"That's why I make him indulge me. Even though Onii-sama has someone he loves, even though doing this for me might get him in trouble… I have no intention to stop loving Onii-sama. Putting aside the fact that you haven't been able to speak till now, you do wish to cheer for Moroboshi-san. Compared to my kind of selfishness, yours is a much more lovable thing."

This was the reason for her words, the reason she came here. She could no longer stand to see Koume continue to bear her guilt at being having to rely on her brother in silence.

She had said what she had come here to say, and not a moment too soon either. From behind them, a tumult stirred in the match venue.

「Kurogane's kicked it up another gear! He's still speeding up, and is cutting Moroboshi's magic guard down by the numbers—it's only a matter of time before he breaks through!」

"It looks like the match is about to end. It's time I went back."

So saying, Shizuku stood up.

"What will you do now? No… what do you want to do?"

Having been questioned thus, Koume looked distressed. It wasn't that she could not understand Shizuku. But she had caused her brother to have that accident, and had even lost her voice of her own accord. Having caused her brother to worry so, could she really have him indulge her?

These worries that swirled around in her mind could not be so quickly dispelled. She was torn. She did not know what to do. But—

「Aah—! At last, Moroboshi's shield has been destroyed! He's in a

huge pinch!」

Brother…!

—throwing down what had occupied her thoughts so, she allowed her legs to carry her towards her brother.

Part 8

Back in the ring, the flow of the battle was almost decided.

「Moroboshi tries to move back to gain some distance, but Kurogane has a read on him! He can't get away! He counters with Sanrensei, but it misses—Kurogane is moving faster than the spear! He's taken three, no, four cuts in return! Blood sprays, staining the white floor of the ring! Kurogane's struck home with all his slashes so far, but not a single thrust of Moroboshi's has hit its mark! The home crowd has been silenced at the onesidedness of it all! It seems rude, but it seems hard to imagine that Moroboshi might reverse this! The difference in power, the difference is skill is just too great!」

Having all but spent the magic power he had used to shield himself and not having enough to use Tiger Bite, Moroboshi could only frantically use his spear to fight back. But he could no longer catch sight of Ikki. With the situation being as it was, of course he would not be able to pierce his opponent. He could do nothing but hit empty air while taking hits himself.

There was simply no contest. From anyone's perspective, this was surely Moroboshi's loss.

「And yet the Seven Stars Sword King does not fall! Yuudai Moroboshi still stands tall in the middle of the ring!」

He would not kneel. He had not given up on victory.

I can't… lose here!

Was it for Koume's sake? No. At first, only his duty as an older brother drove him. To reclaim the voice she had lost because she had seen him at his weakest—so he had thought. But having returned to this field of battle, he had experienced a change of heart. He remembered how much he loved this world, and so his wish became stronger, stronger than anything else.

He didn't just want his treasured little sister to be able to speak again. He wanted to be cheered on by her. His to battle, and hers to support him. Those bygone halcyon days where they shared the joys of knighthood.

It was a rather un-mannish dream, and yet—

—Ain't nothin' more important to me than this!

So until his wish was realized—

"What's wrong, Kurogane—! I'm still standin'! Come and git' me!"

He would continue to be that strong older brother whom Koume could cheer for. That dignity, that wish was what gave Yuudai Moroboshi his unyielding determination.

Part 9

"What spirit… he still hasn't gone down…"

Having returned to her seat, Shizuku could not help but say this with a slight tremor in her voice. Despite being literally helpless and bleeding all over, Moroboshi was still challenging Ikki. What frightening combat instincts. Kurono nodded in agreement.

"As expected of a man who managed to stand back up after suffering

an irrecoverable injury. It might just be impossible to break his spirit. But his body is at its limits. His magic's hit rock bottom, and Tiger Bite has disappeared. He was able to make that fearsome challenge, but that is only because his legs can no longer move. Right now, Moroboshi isn't frightening at all, and Ikki understands that as well. The next blow will end this."

And indeed, the battle proceeded as she said, as a blue mana wrapped around Ikki's body. That was a clear a sign as any that Ikki intended to finish this match right here and now.

「His insurance policy is here, it's Ittou Shura! He's pulling out the ace with which he brought down such names as Hunter, Raikiri, and the Crimson Princess!」

「The Worst One—what an frighteningly expert combatant, choosing to use the most effective technique at the best possible time! To make matters worse, the Seven Stars Sword King can no longer deal with his speed. I can say that he doesn't even have a one in ten thousand chance of winning!」

It was as Muroto said. If Moroboshi could not deal with Ikki in his normal state, there was no way he could do anything against Ikki when Ittou Shura, which boosted his ability tens of times over, was active. With this move, Ikki had cut off any avenue of victory Moroboshi might have had.

"With my weakness, I'll beat the Seven Stars Sword King—Moroboshi-san, let's do this!"

And with that he launched his final attack, aiming to finally end this long and arduous battle. Lowering his stance deeply, and in an instant put all his strength into both his legs. His heels floated up, reached maximum speed, and Ikki bounded towards Moroboshi as though in flight.

「Kurogane's coming to finish this! The Seven Stars Sword King is in a real pinch!」

The commentator Iida yelled, his voice made louder than it had been all day by the impending climax. The crowd churned and roiled at the impending upset of the Seven Stars Sword King in the first round. And amid that earthshaking tumult of cheers and cries—

Koume recalled, as she saw her brother facing defeat, the words that he had said to her when she saw him off in the morning.

「Hey. Could you tell me to do my best?」

Ahh… yes, that's it….

It wasn't just her. Her brother, too, had wished for her to cheer him on as she had in the past. It was such a tiny wish, and how had she replied? She had given him a piece of paper with written support. Wasn't that wrong? What he had wished for wasn't that piece of paper. What he wished for was—

「What will you do now? No. What do you want to do?」

What I should say is—

"BIG BROTHER, DO YOUR BEEESSSTTT—!!!"

She yelled her heart out—yelled out those words that she had always,

always meant to say. Those words that she had held in all this time, believing that having taken her brother's life away she had no right to say them. Those words, rusty from disuse, came from her throat hoarse and soft.

…*Yeah.*

But even amid the thunderous din her words reached her brother Yuudai Moroboshi's ears.

Of course they did. After all, he had been waiting for these words for years and years!

"Jus' leave it t' me—!!!"

Right there and then, the roaring Moroboshi showed everyone in the Dome something unbelievable.

"Strike 'em dooowwwnnn—! *Tora-Ouuuuu!*"

Ikki was charging full-speed ahead towards the half-dead Moroboshi, Ittou Shura about him. But having squeezed the last dregs of his magic for a Tiger Bite, Moroboshi hurled his spear right for Ikki's forehead!

Until now, Moroboshi had always fought within the range of spear. This was his first use of his spear as a thrown weapon.

"This—"

Kurono cried out at this eleventh-hour change.

"—This is bad!"

Why? Indeed, a spear-throw was unusual, and it was quite like Moroboshi to aim for such blind spots in his opponent's line of thought. But there was no way it would hit. Normally, that is. However, this situation was different!

The zero-to-one-hundred burst speed of Edelweiss's swordplay is indeed strong! But it also means that emergency brakes and directional changes are impossible!

This was a matter of course. After all, the world's strongest swordsmanship possessed peerless offensive strength while on the attack, which was always executed at top gear. Thus in truth, its weak point was sudden changes in the situation—that is to say, surprise attacks!

Moreover, Ikki was now using Ittou Shura. Even if he was not using Edelweiss's swordplay, he was already at a speed where a sudden stop or a change in direction was impossible.

In other words, this throw that would not normally have hit Kurogane will do so—but only for this moment!

To counter, he would have to parry the spear with his sword. But he couldn't do that. After all, the flying spear was presently clad in the golden light of Tiger Bite.

Moroboshi's magic should have hit rock bottom. How could he still use Tiger Bite? The reason lay in *Tora-Ou* itself. Its long shaft was halved, rendering it the size of a javelin. Having dispersed the magic power particles within his Device, he had managed to wring out enough magical power for one Tiger Bite. All in all, that throw was one Ikki could neither get hit by nor avoid!

That man Moroboshi… was definitely aiming for this—!

Indeed, Moroboshi had seen through the weakness of Edelweiss' swordplay. For this moment, he had lain in wait. For the moment when Ikki would activate Ittou Shura and advance toward him at a speed that he himself could not suppress.

He had allowed himself to be cut flesh, bone and soul—all for this. This was the truth behind his act of being unable to deal with Ikki's extreme change. A blood-drenched bluff! And that bluff had managed to fool everyone in the Dome—not only the spectators, but even a

knight of Kurono's level!

At top speed as he is, Kurogane can't dodge that throw!

Kurono could not help but shiver at Moroboshi's battle sense, that which had overturned her expectations and played them all for fools. Beside her, Shizuku and Alice felt the same way.

So everyone in here… was within the palm of his hand all along?

So this is… the Seven Stars Sword King!

They had discerned it. The true strength of Seven Stars' pinnacle—of the man who bore the title of Seven Stars Sword King!

—But in the next moment, everyone in the stadium would once again be shocked into frigid silence.

As *Tora-ou*'s point sped through the air and pierced Ikki's forehead… his form shimmered, and faded.

Wh…at….

Moroboshi was at a loss for words. Just then, a shadow appeared above him. Silhouetted against the sun, the figure of a black swordsman was about to let fly his blade.

This was the secret sword that had eluded Houkiboshi earlier—Shinkirou. But this time, it neither feinted front-to-back nor left-to-right, but rather up and down. Leaving an afterimage below, he had sent himself soaring into the air with his enhanced leg strength. That which Moroboshi had hurled his spear at had never been anything more than an illusion.

In other words, Ikki knew that Moroboshi would choose this moment to try the last. But why? For what reason?

Ah… so that's it….

Looking at the expression on Ikki's face as he brought his blade down, Moroboshi understood. Ikki's face held not the slightest hint of mocking him for having fallen for that feint. There was only overflowing—almost embarrassingly so—respect.

You really believed in me….

Up till now the Seven Stars Sword King had layered stratagem upon stratagem, trap upon trap to make sure he had the worst of it. Kurogane Ikki had not believed for a moment that such a great king would easily allow himself to be defeated. He respected the knight named Yuudai Moroboshi more than anyone else in the stadium, even more than Moroboshi did himself.

This was why Moroboshi lost. He had fooled everyone with that blood-soaked bluff, but only this knight standing before him, he could not fool.

And so, the battle was decided in that instant.

Ikki let fly his blade. Having bet it all on this surprise attack, Moroboshi had nothing left—no magic, no weapon, not even the strength to flee. The blade bit deep, slicing him from the shoulder down. In a flurry of crimson, Moroboshi at least fell upon his knees. At the last, with the final vestiges of his strength, he reached out his arms and grabbed Ikki by the shoulders, and—

—to the knight who had surpassed him…

—to his opponent who had believed in him to the end…

"Don'cha lose now, y'hear?"

—he left his wish.

With that, the Seven Stars Sword King finally collapsed, and the referees gave the signal for the match's end—thus bringing this showdown to a close.

Part 10

「Th-The match is ovvveeerrr! Reversal after reversal—there was no breathing room in this wild roller-coaster ride of a fourth match here in Block C! The one who has won this deathmatch is the Crownless Sword King, Ikki Kurogane—! The one who came to challenge the heretofore undone, a second consecutive title—the Seven Stars Sword King has actually been beaten in the first round! It's a huge upset!」

The instant the match was declared ended, the medical teams rushed in, bearing Moroboshi away on a stretcher. So exhausted he could not walk on his own two feet, he exited the stage to the thunderous applause of his fans and supporters.

「Was hard on ya! Did well—y' really did well!」

「Been supportin' ya since before y'retired… you were the best today!」

「The home crowd gives an ovation to their hero as he is stretchered out, unconscious. This man did not bow to an irrecoverable injury, and till today he has never bowed out in a single match—he continues to stand at the top, Yuudai Moroboshi! Even though we say he was defeated, the will that he showed us till the end brought no shame to the title given to the strongest student knight in Japan, the Seven Stars Sword King! What a magnificent man!」

And as for the winner, Ikki, who watched as Moroboshi was being wheeled out—

"Yes, I won't lose. Definitely."

Answering Moroboshi's parting words with strong feelings of his own, he descended from the ring.

「And now, the one who defeated the victor of last year's tournament and proudly enters the second round—the Crownless Sword King leaves the ring. The weakest magic and the strongest swordplay—this

rating was not false, and all of us here can attest to that! This young man here is the real deal! He's not just some F-rank. He is surely a knight who possesses the power to fight for the summit of this gathering of powerhouses, the sixty-second Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival!」

「That was crazy awesome, bro!」

「Ikki-kun is the greatest!」

「Ride the wave to the top! You can do it!」

His exit was graced by a shower of applause. He felt a little embarrassed at this, but—

Thank you very much.

Thanking them thus in his heart, he headed back to the gate through which he had come in.

His footsteps were heavy, a combination of the fatigue from using Ittou Shura and the execution of movements he was unused to. But his back was unbent. He was proud of himself for having been able to defeat such a strong knight.

It had been a match full of uncertainties. He was so scared coming out of the holding room. But—he had won. He had snatched victory from that hellish first round match of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

With this, there were four more left. Four more victories, and he would finally reach it. The place he had aimed for, the place he had looked up to till now.

The summit of the Seven Stars… is no longer far-off!

It was with this feeling in his heart that Ikki left the field.

And deeper through the gate—

Clap clap

A shadowy figure walked towards him, applauding.

"See? You won in the end."

The path from the holding room to the gate was not illuminated, and was utterly dark. Thus, there being some distance between him and this person, and he could not see the face.

But for Ikki, that was unnecessary. He only needed to hear that voice to know who it was. Yes, the person approaching the gate was—

"But I guess that was only natural. After all, the one who will defeat the Crownless Sword King is me."

—the girl with the blazing red hair and beautiful ruby-red eyes, the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion.

Epilogue: The Star takes the Stage

破軍学園壁新聞

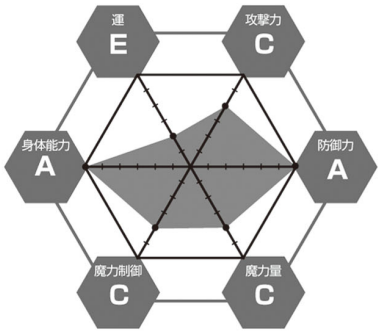
キャラクタートピックス　　文責・日下部加々美

YUDAI MOROBOSI

諸星雄大

■PROFILE

所属：武曲学園三年
伐刀者ランク：B
伐刀絶技（タイガーバイト）：暴喰
二つ名：七星剣王
人物概要：前年度七星剣武祭覇者



かがみんチェック！

言わずと知れた《七星剣王》。魔力を喰い殺す超レアな伐刀絶技《暴喰》は全ての伐刀者相手に優位に立ち回れる便利な能力だね。
その便利な能力と卓越した槍術を軸に、二重三重の搦め手で試合を緻密に組み立てる頭脳派の選手。勝負所で相手の意識の死角から、喉元に牙を突き立てる様は、まさしく野生の虎さながらだよ。

The one who greeted Ikki, who had defeated the the Seven Stars Sword King Yuudai Moroboshi and succeeded in advancing to the second round, at the gate to congratulate him was none other than

his lover Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion, who had yet to be seen at the venue due to a delay on the Shinkansen.

Whoops and cheers went up as she came out of the gate.

「It's the Crimson Princess, Stella Vermillion! She's arrived!」

「Ooh, it really is her! It's the Crimson Princess in the flesh!」

「Her hair really is crimson! So pretty...」

「She's got a fine stature...I mean, would'ja look at dem long legs…!」

These did not pale at all in comparison to those that had accompanied Moroboshi's entrance.

Such attention was what should have been expected of an A-Rank Knight.

But the one happiest with her arrival was surely the young man named Ikki Kurogane.

"Wonderful, Stella...you made it."

He too was glad that she could make it, but more than that...he had craved their long-awaited reunion.

His chest burned as if on lit by a fire hotter still than his wounds. Only when he was in front of her did he realize just how much he longed for her.

"Well, I did really want to make it on time, but fallen rocks had blocked up the tracks. It took some time to clear them out, you know? The Shinkansen really should just have a drill fitted in the front - it would look cool anyway."

"That was quite the misfortune, huh…"

More importantly, when she said 'clear them out'...

Did she mean she cleared them by hand?

...Hmm, maybe I shouldn't press for details.

"That aside, you had a very tough opponent. I only caught the tail end of it, but that alone was more than enough for me to realize that."

"That's true…but I won. It's your turn now."

"Yes, I know," Stella replied immediately, her eyes lit with burning confidence.

The painfully dispirited figure she had cut by the unconscious Touka's bedside was nowhere to be found. Somehow, it seemed that the training with Saikyou had produced satisfactory results.

That's great.

Passing by Ikki, whose heart's load had been lifted, Stella faced the spectators.

"I'm sorry for being late! Stella Vermillion has arrived!"

「Representative Stella apologizes to the audience cheerily! So polite, I like her already!」

「Still, since she didn't get her on time, where will the postponed match be held?」

「The Organizing Committee is conferring on this very matter right now. It might be shifted to the last match or may follow soon after the end of the Block C matches, so I think, but...oh! We have been informed that the conference has ended. Ladies and gentlemen, as the Organizing Committee desires to directly relay its decision to us regarding the fourth match of Block B, please turn your attention to

the screen.」

On Iida's cue, all in the stadium turned as one to face the screen.

A bald old man appeared on-screen.

「Ah, it's Kaieta.」

「Oh, really! It's the Thunder of Judgement, Yuuzou Kaieta!」

Those forty-something and over within the stands greeted the bald old man's appearance with enthusiasm. After all, the Thunder of Judgement was the hero of their era, the one who had triumphed in the King of Knights A-League.

And now, this hero was the Chairman of this year's Organizing Committee, representing them to announce the results of their meeting.

「Ehem, dear esteemed guests and participants, good afternoon. I am Yuuzou Kaieta, Chairman of the 62nd Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival Organizing Committee. Allow me to share the consensus of the Committee regarding the time at which the fourth match of Block B, which was postponed due to the late arrival of Representative Stella Vermillion, should be held. Our consensus is that the fourth match of Block B shall be held after this one.」

The result was as commentator Iida had anticipated. Since the Block C matches had now come to an end, the organizers had agreed as one that it would be convenient to hold the delayed match right afterward.

All that was left now was to get the agreement of the representatives themselves.

「Representative Stella, do you have any objections?」

"I'm fine with it," she replied immediately.

The reason why this had all happened had been because she was late. She would not object to their decision, regardless of what it was.

“Oh, there’s definitely a problem over here.”’

As opposed to Stella’s bright voice, this voice cut through the noise by being cold to the point of being frigid. Sharply, it expressed its dissatisfaction at the decision made.

That voice of course belonged to but one person.

A young lady with ash-blonde hair leapt the ten metres from the spectator stands onto the Dome’s astroturf soundlessly - Mikoto Tsuruya, the Icy Sneer.

“How troubling, to have disregarded me and made a decision all on your own.”

「Oh, no, no, of course we intended to confer with you as well. Might the trouble be that you find holding this match next to be inconvenient? If that is so, we can arrange for the match to be the last one for today. This delay was after all not due to any fault of yours, and as such the Organizing Committee is prepared to be flexible.」

Tsuruya however shook her head at Kaieta’s words.

He didn’t understand.

And indeed his lack of understand was almost appalling.

What she was requesting had nothing to do with when the match would be held.

“I have no objections about the conduct of the match itself, per se. However, I cannot accept that no penalty will be imposed on those who were late,” Tsuruya said, pointing at Stella from across the ring. “I’m here to request that an official penalty be imposed on

Representative Stella.”

This caused a stir in the audience.

「Hey, hey, what’s this?」

「That ain’t like a knight! Fight fair n’ square!」

Most of them did not wish for a match with a penalty. What they had looked forward to was a straight-up, full-power battle between young knights.

As such, even though there were a small few who could be heard expressing views in favor of Tsuruya’s claim, noting that 「Mikoto-san’s hasn’t said anything wrong, has she?」or 「Isn’t it bad to be late as one pleases? It should be fine to impose a penalty」, most were opposed to it.

Nonetheless, Tsuruya was unmoved.

Her cold, mocking sneer never fading, she did not retract her request.

Hmph. You can criticise me all you want. But regardless how much you do so, I’m not backing down.

The Crimson Princess Stella Vermillion was not an opponent she had any odds of beating in a straight-up fight.

Hence, she had to manipulate the situation to her advantage.

Regardless of how she would be hated for it, it did not matter so long as she won.

Winning was the only thing of value to a knight. That was Icy Sneer Mikoto Tsuruya’s way of thinking. In a way, she was similar to Ikki and Moroboshi in that they all understood the essence of what it meant to be a knight.

However, her claim did not quite have a leg to stand on.

「Hmmm...indeed, there is precedent for the act of imposing a penalty upon latecomers. However, such actions were limited to those who delayed for malicious reasons or were uncontactable. Since this particular delay has been confirmed to be due to a rockslide messing up the Shinkansen schedule, the Organizing Committee believes that a penalty imposition is unnecessary. If a penalty had to be imposed, the Committee feels that having to compete immediately upon arrival is handicap enough.」

“Guh…!”

In truth, the Organizing Committee had already discussed the imposition of a penalty on Stella even without Tsuruya’s intervention. But falling back on previous cases, their consensus judged it unnecessary.

Thus, Tsuruya’s claim would not go through.

That is-

“No, it’s insufficient.”

-Unless Stella Vermillion herself were to suggest a penalty as well.

“S-Stella?!”

Ikki sputtered from beside her, his eyes widening at her sudden declaration.

But she paid him no mind and continued speaking.

“The Icy Sneer’s suggestion is perfectly reasonable. In the first place, if I had arrived a day before the tournament like everyone else, I would not have been involved in the rockslide incident. Since it was my misjudgement, I think it is necessary to impose some punishment.”

At this, Ikki, the spectators, the Organizing Committee...indeed everyone in the Dome was speechless.

Of course. With the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival being an single-elimination tournament, there was no meaning in daring to make things harder for oneself.

「Well, this...is quite surprising. To think that you would say such a thing...」

Stella nodded.

“Even if Tsuruya-san had not brought it up, I would still have planned to request a penalty. The Vermillion royal family prizes honesty and fairness. I have never considered escaping the punishment due for the sin of arriving late.”

「Hmm, I see.」

“As such, I have a suggestion regarding the next match.”

「A suggestion?」

“Yes. If we were to hold the match according to the existing rules, it would be unfair to Tsuruya-san, who arrived on time. As such, I would like for a special rule to be in force as a handicap on myself during our match. In concrete terms, I would like all the remaining members of Block B, starting with Tsuruya-san, to engage in a four-on-one match with me.”

「Wh, what did you say?!」

Kaieta nearly croaked at Stella’s penatly suggestion.

Of course, he was not the only one to be shocked, for the spectators in the Dome too began to express their surprise.

「H, hey hey now, what kind of crazy stuff is this Princess

saying…!」

「There should be a limit to what you mean by ‘penalty’!?」

All who heard it thought they might be mistaken.

Even knowing that this was to her advantage, Tsuruya could not help but ask this:

“A, are you serious…?!”

Stella nodded genially in response, and relieving her tone of the formalities adopted in speaking to an elder like Kaieta she grew lighthearted, as one speaking to a young lady of similar age.

“I’m serious,” she replied, composed, “being late is a serious mistake for which disqualification according to the rules would not be strange. When you think about it that way, this sort of penalty is par for course, isn’t it? Of course, I do intend to seek the assent of the others first.”

Behind her, Ikki paled.

This…this is bad!

Why? Naturally, the penalty Stella had suggested was reckless. But the bigger problem here lay with the people who would participate in the battle due to this penalty. Three people were left from the matches of Block B that were already finished, and they…

…are all members of Akatsuki Academy!

Other contestants might not agree to such an arrangement.

After all, they had already won, and thus did not have to butt into Stella’s match for Tsuruya’s sake. They had no reason to do so.

But Akatsuki was different.

They were mercenaries hired by the Anti-League faction for the task of dominating the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival.

Performing well at the Festival, in and of itself, meant nothing to them. Their mission was accomplished so long as any one of them made it to and emerged triumphant in the finals.

As such, they would definitely jump at this delicious opportunity…!

Stella was an A-Rank, the same as Ouma, who was most likely Akatsuki's strongest member.

They would not miss this hard to come by chance to defeat her in such an overwhelmingly advantageous position as a four-versus-one.

Ikki's premonition proved spot-on.

"Fufufufu...now this, is really interesting."

Puppeteer Reisen Hiraga's voice was filled with unbridled amusement at his opponent's suicidal words as he laughed from the spectator stands.

"This is the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, a competition in which no foe is to be underestimated. To request a four-on-one battle against yourself as a remonstrance...as expected of the Crimson Princess I've heard about, your pride really is a different beast."

With that, he propelled himself from the stands, landing beside Tsuruya.

"Ain't this just the words of some shitty pig with nothin' but power?"

"Kukuku...do not retract your words, Your Crimson Highness."

Following Hiraga's descent, winter wear-clad Yui Tatara the Unturning too descended to take her place beside Tsuruya facing Stella, with Beast Tamer Rinna Kazamatsuri astride her black lion in

her wake.

They signalled their intent with their actions.

“We of Akatsuki Academy have no objections. Let us do our part for the sake of a fair tournament, shall we?”

「Mhmm. I see...What about you, Representative Tsuruya?」

“I...I don’t have anything to say about these conditions.”

Her approval, critical as it was, came out faltering at conditions so favorable that she seemed to almost wish for it to not be so.

Nonetheless, she gave her approval all the same.

「Hmmm...」

Having received the approval of all the participants, Kaieta closed his eyes and furrowed his brows in thought.

「Hey, hey, what’s he agonizing about? Is he really considering letting this messed up penalty pass?」

「Four-versus-one isn’t a match, it’s a lynching!」

「But it’s kinda interestin’, someways! Let ‘em fight!」

A peculiar tension gripped the audience as Kaieta considered.

Stella’s far-out-of-left-field request and its accompanying rules had piqued the interest of many in the audience. Even those who had cast aspersions on Tsuruya’s request for a penalty initially had begun to adopt a position of approval instead.

Those with differing opinions even began to debate amongst themselves.

This uproarious situation persisted for around one minute.

And then Kaieta's eyes opened.

「I understand. Since there are no objections from the participants, this match will be held with modified rules in accordance with Representative Stella's self-appointed handicap.」

He declared in his capacity as head of the Organizing Committee.

「You serious?!」

「What is the Committee thinking?!」

「Order, Order! Appending the rules based on mutual agreements between knight apprentices is not unheard of, especially in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, in which they are the stars. The content of the penalty is indeed a little excessive, but it was ultimately Representative Stella's request. As such, it will be dealt with as per normal.」

Silencing the jeering sections in the crowd, Kaieta then turned to the two people in question.

「I will now confirm the rules. Leaving aside Representative Tsuruya, Representative Stella will have to defeat Representatives Hiraga, Kazamatsuri and Tatara. On the other hand, Representative Tsuruya is victorious if she or any of the others defeat Representative Stella. Will this be acceptable?」

"It's fine."

"Yes. I thank you for your indulgence, Committee Chairman."

Both parties agreed to accept these modified rules.

With this, the Organizing Committee's role was ended.

「Mmm…Then, Iida-san, I leave the rest to you.」

「Eh, ah, y-yes.」

Handing the time over to the commentator Iida, Kaieta flickered out of the screen's view.

「Well, um…s, somehow, something amazing has happened. I've been casting events for a long time, but casting a four-versus-one event is a first for me too. But since the participants have agreed to it, and the Organizing Committee has allowed it, let's get down to the commentary!」

Thought Iida at first seemed shaken by this common-sense-defying turn of events, he quickly recovered both himself and the peppy organizer's tone he had taken during the other matches.

「In that case, we will soon begin the match between Stella Vermillion and Mikoto Tsuruya! Would the two of you, as well as our guest participants, make your way to the ring please.」

"Well then, I'm going," Stella said confidently upon receiving Iida's instructions as she turned to face Ikki. "You can go rest now - you look exhausted, and there's probably nothing to see here at this match."

She was as lighthearted as a little child, despite now having to go up against not only Tsuruya Mikoto, one of the previous year's Best Eight, as well as three underworld mercenaries all in one go.

Ikki couldn't understand that.

"…Stella…why would you take this kind of unnecessary extra risk onto yourself?"

If she had kept silent, there would have been no need for a penalty.

Her actions brought her no benefit in the slightest…or so he could

only think.

Thus he could not help but ask.

Why would she do such a thing?

“Are you confident that you will be able to beat all four of them?”

Stella shook her head.

“Well, I don’t know how it will go. At the very least, I can’t say that I’m ‘confident’...I don’t even know what their abilities are in the first place, after all.”

“Then, why...”

“Because it’s something I have to do,” she said softly, and gazed upon the tournament bracket that had replaced Kaieta’s face on the screen.

She glared at the Block B second round matches, that would be held the next day.

“The way we are going, the first match of the second round will be between Hiraga and Kazamatsuri, fellow Akatsuki members. They will surely conspire to have one of them leave the field of battle before that.”

That was a certain outcome. After all, Akatsuki as mentioned before were not ordinary students but rather a team of mercenaries. They had absolutely no interest in winning personal glory at the Festival. As such, they would not participate in pointless conflicts that would only reduce the fighting strength of their own allies.

Therefore, either the Beast Tamer or the Puppeteer would forfeit before Block B’s second round matches began, allowing the other to have a walkover victory.

“...I will never allow that.”

“Stella…”

Now that she’d said this much, Ikki understood why she had been so happy to impose that reckless penalty on herself.

It was not for some prettied-up reason like the ‘Royal Way’ that she had spoken of in front of Kaieta.

She had only one purpose.

“I will never allow those who did that to our school and to our friends to get off scot-free right before my very eyes.”

She was here for revenge on those who had hurt her dear friends, Touka and Ayatsuji, among others.

“I’ll burn them all to ashes.”

With a low voice like the bubbling of a volcanic crater before eruption, Stella stepped out.

As though answering the call of the unexpressed anger she had held in check since that assault, her hair itself lit on fire, phosphorescent wisps trailing from flaming locks as she walked, gazing dead ahead at the Akatsuki members already in the ring.

…

Ikki felt that Stella was too fired up. But there was nothing to be done - this stemmed from her kindness and anger for her friends’ sakes.

Thus, he saw her off on in silence.

All I can do now is believe.

In Stella, who had gone through that training with Saikyou, and her strength.

Do your best, Stella…!

「Now then! The fourth match of Block B shall begin! LET'S GO AHEAD-!!!!」

And so did the match with the abnormal rules commence.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing volume 5 of Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan. I'm the author, Riku Misora.

I penned this afterword in July. But man, the summer in Japan never changes - it's hot, it's stuffy, it's really tough to get through.

My room has neither air-conditioning nor fan. It's hardly an environment you could do work in.

But that's until next month.

I'm moving from the house I've stayed in since my elementary school days, and I'm going to get my own air-conditioning and television. Yay～

What's more, my next house allows me to keep a pet. I'm looking forward to it.

A cat. I wanna keep a cat.

A Cat!

I think my next Afterword is probably going to all about cats. It can't be helped.

Well, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival has finally begun in this volume.

Ikki cleared his hellish first battle, while Stella did a lot of things as well. Will they be able to pull through this powerhouse-packed Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival and meet again in the finals?

I hope you will enjoy watching over them, even as I work hard at writing the respective paths of these two.

To Editor-san, who has helped me to polish my manuscripts; to WON-san, who has always put out such wonderful illustrations; and to all of you readers who have supported Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan, I give you my thanks this time as well.

I hope you can continue to support this work.

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